

異世界料理道

Cooking with
wild game.

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VOLUME
3



Cooking with Wild Game 異世界料理道

Volume 3

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「あなたの作るその食事を、私たちに
売っていただくことはできませんでしょうか？」

言いながら、ガズラン・ルティムは

その太い首にかけていた牙と角を、
じやらりと外した。

狩人の誇りであり、親からの愛の証し
である首飾りが、俺の前に差し出される。

異世界料理道

Cooking with wild game.

VOLUME
3



ガズラン＝ルティム

ルティム家の長兄。アスタによる
前祝の料理に感銘を受け、
婚儀の宴の料理をアスタに依頼する。
実直だが考えには柔軟性があり、
心の裡には部族を想う熱い信念を
持っている。



宴が——始まるのだ。

「アスタ」と軽く腕を引かれる。
振り返ると、アイルフアが静かに俺を見つめていた。
俺はうなずき、拳を握りしめる。

アマ=ミン

ルティム家に嫁ぐことになった女性。
ガズランと共にアスタへ
婚儀の宴の料理を依頼する。
年齢の割には落ち着いているが、
根は快活で社交的。

楽しいのだろう。
幸福なのだろう。

自分の息子がこれほどまでに立派に育ち、
これほどまでに美しい花嫁を
得ることが出来たのが、
嬉しくて嬉しくてたまらないのだろう。

この距離ではよくわからなかったが、
そのぎよろりと大きな目玉には、
うつすらと光るものがあるような
気がした。

「大いに飲んで、喰らってくれ！
この日のために尽力してくれた
ルウの女衆にも、祝福を！」

「えへへー。

ダン!!ルタイムのまねー」



Prologue - Gorge

A terrifying scene appeared before me.

We were at a deep stony valley, about thirty minutes from the Fa house by foot.

After passing through the water source we always used, I looked up at the Morga mountain to the right and walked towards the steep hills, this majestic and terrifying sights appeared before my eyes.—

It was a gorge.

An unknown river appeared below the steep cliffs, and the sound of the fast flowing river could be heard.

The sound actually came from quite some distance away, at least 20 meters separate the edge of the cliff we were standing at and the river flowing below.

20 meters— In the world I was from, that was roughly equivalent to a five storey building.

I was a little scared of heights, but it wasn't the crippling kind. Just looking at the rapids from the cliff wouldn't make my legs tremble.

The truly terrifying thing wasn't the cliff.

It was the fragile hand made 「suspension bridge」 that made me panic.

「... Are you kidding?」

When I asked that, my beloved mistress tilted her head and asked: 「What do you mean?」

She's actually asking what I meant— I sighed.

This primitive suspension bridge was about ten meters long and one meter wide, built from old logs and brown dried vines.

Even though there wasn't even so much as a breeze, the bridge was still shaking slowly. Just the thought of stepping onto this bridge filled me with dread.

「... I'm uneasy about the stability of this suspension bridge.」

I tried articulating my opinion.

After coming to this different world, this was probably the first time I showed such a tense face, and my mistress was getting more and more confused.

Ai Fa was a denizen of Forest's Edge, and also the head of the Fa house.

It goes without saying that she was my benefactor, my housemate and a brave hunter.

Her long blonde hair seldom seen in Forest's Edge was tied up into a complicated hair style.

Strong light could be seen in her deep blue eyes.

Her brown skin was as smooth as chocolate milk, and her slender body was like an intrinsic sculpture.

Although her height was average, her proportionate body was filled with dazzling life force and energy.

Draped on Ai Fa was the proof of a hunter —— a cape made from kiba hide, and brightly colored clothes that only cover her chest and waist. On her slim waist was a large sabre and a knife, and her feet that had beautiful curves wore shoes tied with strings.

On her shapely bosom was a necklace filled with large numbers of tusks and horns, on her slender wrist was a bangle of kili fruit that repels poisonous bugs.

Ai Fa was dressed like usual.

Last night—— We completed our job of preparing the pre-wedding celebration for the Lutim house, and Ai Fa was not like herself when we were in the room allocated to us. But after one night, she was back to normal.

A happy ending.

It was great that she had returned to normal—— but did I convey my unease to her properly?

「Asuta, are you worried about this bridge?」

Ai Fa said quietly.

「If my guess is correct, then don't worry. The vines used to build this suspension bridge are called Flehaba vines, it might look thin, but it doesn't break easily. Even when it's dried up like this, it is still as strong as human hair.」

Even if she compared it to hair which was unexpectedly strong, it didn't ease my worries at all. Compared to the tough vines which looked fragile, I would prefer for the denizens of Forest's Edge to use something thicker and sturdier to erect this bridge, even if the toughness was a notch lower. This way, my heart would be more at ease.

「... This bridge is here before I was born, and there have never been any problems with it, so it is completely safe.」

「No, even if there isn't any problem before, it doesn't mean that it will be safe today! And since this bridge has such a long history, that means it is really old, right!?!」

「That's why you have to carefully inspect the vines to check for damage when you cross it. Anyone who spotted any damage is responsible for repairing it. This suspension bridge only lasted for decades because everyone adheres to this rule.」

「... House head Ai Fa, I can't wipe away the unease in my heart. Isn't there a safer and more comfortable way?」

「... This route is the quickest from my house to the post station town. Going any other way would require twice as much time.」

That's right, in order to exchange the kiba tusks and horns for food, we were on our way to the post station town.

Our aria, poitan and fruit wine were almost depleted. Ai Fa would usually head to town when there was more food to spare, but we were busy with the match with Donda Wu. That match finally concluded yesterday. We returned home early in the morning, forage for pico leaves and after finishing the minimum chores, we left our home.

It has been twenty days since I arrived in this different world, and I would finally step into the world outside the forest.

My heart was trembling because of the expectation and unease of the unknown world.

But right now, my body was trembling for another reason.

「Enough. If we spend any more time here, the sun will set before we accomplish our goal.」

「Please wait! Erm... Can I please hold your hand?」

Ai Fa frowned and rejected with: 「I absolutely refuse.」

「What's the use of doing that? If we fall, you will still die even if you held my hand. If you want to grab onto something, grab the vines on the bridge.」

「T-That's not it, this humble one yearns for a sense of security! House head Ai Fa, to this humble one, you are more reliable than these frail vines!」

「... Stop that annoying manner of speech at once, or I will cut off your tongue.」

「Sorry.」

「Anyway, there's no use in holding my hand, so I refuse. If you feel that uneasy, then grab the hem of my cape.」

After saying that coldly, she walked towards the suspension bridge with her cape flowing behind her.

I grabbed a corner of her cape that flew up.

「O-Okay, it's fine! Let's go then!」

Ai Fa sighed heavily without even looking at me, then strode forth unhesitantly.

I could only move slowly like the auxiliary spacecraft in a 2D shooter game, and followed her slowly.

Ai Fa stepped onto the plank.

The suspension bridge shook a lot.

I made up my mind and followed her onto the plank.

The bridge shook intensely again.

「... Uwah～」

「Shut up.」

「W-Wait! At least hold on to the hand rails! Both my hands are on your cape!」

「I told you to shut up!」

Ai Fa walked with her usual confident strides, advancing without any hesitation.

The bridge kept shaking and shaking.

I couldn't even look down, I was afraid of my body becoming crippled if I did.

The suspension bridge was about ten metres in length, and while I was panicking, I had already covered five metres. If I continue staring at the back of Ai Fa's head, I should be able to make it through.

However...

「... Hmm, this vine is breaking.」

When I heard Ai Fa said that unconsciously, the reason and sensibility in my heart flew off hand in hand into the horizon.

「Uwahh! Wahh!」

I yelled and grabbed Ai Fa's body with all my might.

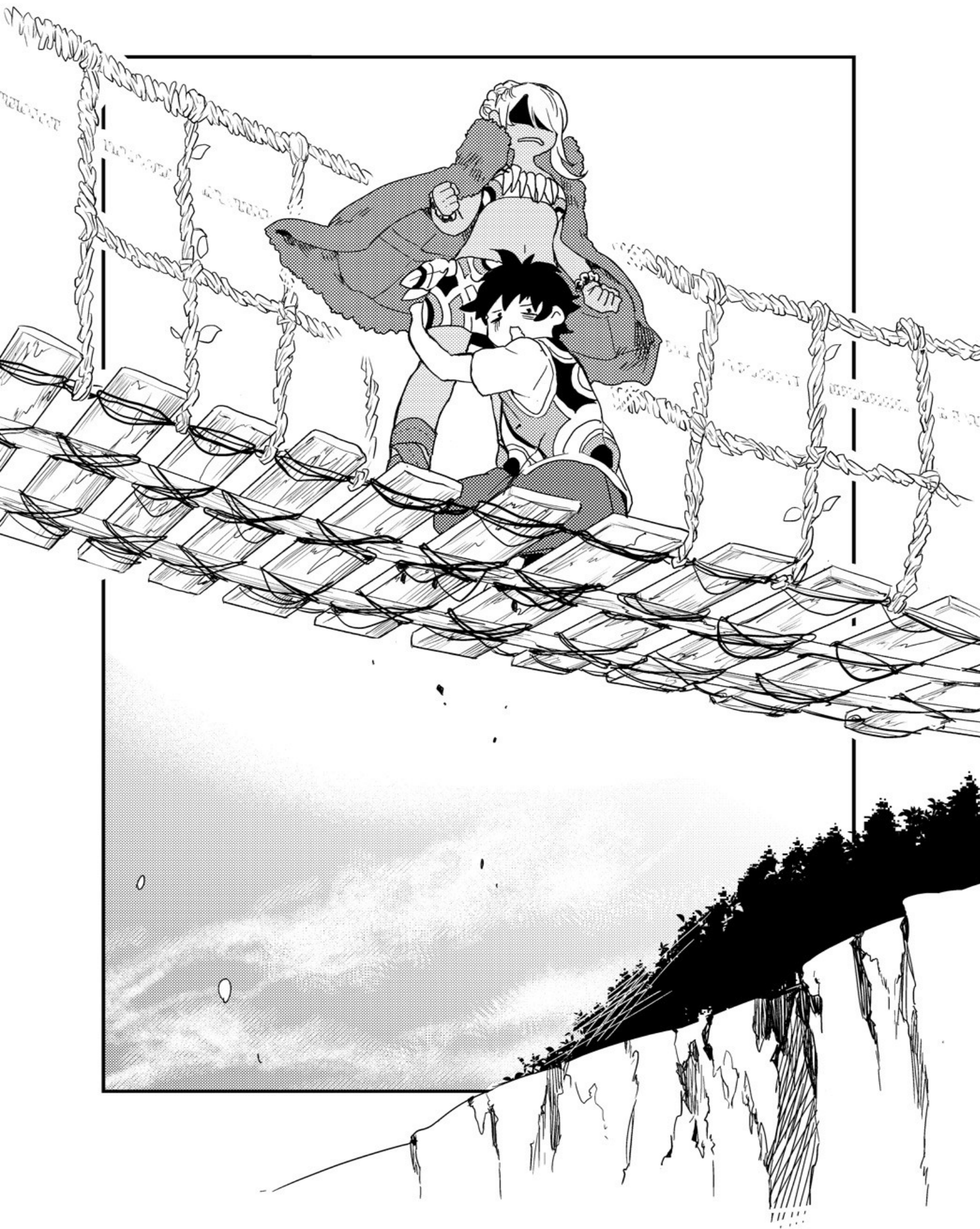
The bridge shook wildly, and my feet almost slip off the plank.

「Uwah! Uwah!! Uwah!!!」

「Moron! Unhand me! Do you really want to die!?」

Ai Fa's angry roar reverberated in the gorge.

Her voice was like a ceremonial cannon that pulled open the curtain to this long day.



Chapter 1 - The Post Station Town of Genos

Part 1

Genos was a territory of the Western Kingdom Selva.

The Western Kingdom took pride in its vast lands, and Genos was situated on the eastern borders, slightly to the south. It was founded at the foot of Mount Morga, a city at the borders.

For the Selva Kingdom, Genos was located at its borders, but the territory was rather close to their friendly nations—— the Southern kingdom Jaguar, and the Eastern Kingdom Simu, and was an important trade hub.

It also had temperate climate, rich water sources and fertile farmlands.

The center of this territory was called 『Rock City』. The central city was protected by sturdy stone walls, and entry wasn't permitted without a pass.

To the north of Rock City were the noble's orchard, to the south were the peasant's farmland.

A stone paved road stretched from the south to the north, splitting the Genos territory from the Morga mountain range—— and many citizens set up stores on either side of the road.

In the gap between the city and farmland was a post station town where travelers and merchants could visit freely.

And that was the Genos post station town.

「Uwah...」

I was dumbfounded right from the start.

After betting my life and overcoming that terrifying bridge, the world suddenly turned wide open after walking for half an hour. Even after adding in the time we walked from the Fa house, it had just been an hour.

Physically speaking, this felt about the same distance from our house to the Wu clan.

Despite that —— the world completely changed.

「What a huge surprise... This feels like another world...」

After recovering my speech capability, I squeezed out something unimportant.

That was how drastic the change before my eyes was.

「Don't be so surprised. The denizens of Forest's Edge lived there in order to protect the farms of Genos from being destroyed by the kibas. That's why our settlement is so close to Genos.」

Ai Fa still sounded unhappy in her reply, but such a one sided explanation couldn't suppress my shock.

The denizens of Forest's Edge wore fur cape and hunt kibas in the forest for a living. And these brave hunters were actually so close to such a civilized land, it was hard for me to accept this fact.

The buildings here were built with wood too.

But almost all of them had two floors, instead of a single storey building.

Some of them even used stones and cement, and were sturdily built.

White stones paved the path beneath my feet.

This was the so called 『stone paved road』.

The road was about 10 metres wide, and was flanked tightly by buildings on either side, stretching in a straight line from north to south.

And this town was filled with people.

All kinds of people could be found here, but none were dressed like hunters.

A slightly plump man hurried down the street, with a small cylindrical hat on his head. He had a yellow shirt, loose cream-colored pants and a large bamboo basket on his back.

One woman walked elegantly in the crowd, her chest covered by a piece of cloth and a wide shawl on her shoulders. A long skirt covered her waist to her ankles. She wasn't as beautiful as Vena Wu, but was also very sexy.

A burly man walked slowly along the path, his shirt was cut out of a camel-colored hide, and was clearly not from a kiba. A piece of cloth was wrapped around his waist and he wore leather sandals, so his clothing was similar to the denizens of Forest's Edge. On his waist was a hand axe and leather pouch.

There were a large variety of people here, and there was no way to describe the attire of each and every person.

A skinny old man in grey robes with a bandana wrapped around his head.

The children wore clothes made from tattered rags and ran around.

Strong well built men carried cargo half naked.

There were some men in hoods and cloaks that hid their faces.

Most of them had ivory colored skin like that of a Japanese, or tanned yellowish brown skin. But their hair wasn't limited to black, and mainly ranges between dark brown to chestnut brown. Their facial features were prominent, very much different from people of my hometown.

Aside from them, there were a small group that had white skin with a slight red tint, and another small group that had skin tones darker than the denizens of Forest's Edge.

They meandered busily through the streets, moving nimbly and taking care not to run into others.

Aside from the wide variety of people, the density of buildings and people was also shocking.

「Uwah—— What is that!？」

A thin object could be seen sticking out from the crowd, about a meter taller than everyone else. It bounced up and down slightly as it approaches us.

「That's a Totos Moa¹.」

Ai Fa said nonchalantly.

Before my eyes was a huge bird 3m long, which looked like an enlarged ostrich.

Its long neck was just like an ostrich's, and its round body was supported by thick legs—— but it was covered by dark brown feathers.

Leather belt was tied around its sharp beaks, and reins were tied to the bottom of its neck. A large man with yellowish brown skin held its reins, and the man only had a piece of cloth around his waist, and a cloth hat on his head.

Large luggage covered in cloth hung on either side of its body.

「There are only inns in this zone, the food stalls are further to the north.」

「Wait—— Wait for me, Ai Fa.」

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moa>

Before Ai Fa could walk into the crowd, I grabbed her hand on reflex.

Ai Fa whose face showed hints of anger wanted to shake off my hand, but she suddenly came near me and asked:

「Asuta, what's the matter? Your face is pale. Are you unwell?」

「I'm fine. I'm fine... Just give me some time.」

I could feel Ai Fa's body warmth with my finger tips, and tightly closed my eyes.

It was hard to breathe as I wobbled my head. When I realized it, my heart was pumping intensely and the artery in my temple was beating strongly along with the rhythm of my heartbeat.

My sense of reason was rejecting this scene.

This place was too similar to another world.

Forest's Edge's environment was very different from my world. After all, the people in Forest's Edge will wear the hides of their prey and hunt in forest. To me, such a lifestyle was no different from a story in a light novel.

But, how should I put this—— the denizens of Forest's Edge will use weapons forged from steel, erect wooden houses and cook food with stoves. They were civilized, but they live as one with nature. Instead of living in a different world, I felt closer to living in an uncharted land deep in the dense forest.

But this post station town was different.

They erect houses with planks, but the ground was properly laid and paved with stones. The eyes of the people didn't burn intensely like feral beasts. They looked like they were enjoying a stable lifestyle as they meandered hurriedly along the road.

I was familiar with this scene.

This place was very similar to the world I was used to.

There definitely weren't any electrical facilities in this town, and the development of their metallurgy was probably limited. The level of civilization was closer to the middle ages of my world.

But this was still very similar to me.

It might be similar, but it was also filled with the exotic style of a different world.

This wasn't the city enclosed in stone walls, and was just a crude and messy post station town near the road. Even so, it was still a 「town」. These people didn't need to hunt for a living, and could obtain food through the trades. That makes them 「townsmen」.

This place was too similar to my world, and that made me confused.

So this isn't my original world. I'm in an unfamiliar different world, I—— can't go back to my world anymore——

「Asuta——」

I felt a powerful force on my nape.

I felt someone pulled me hard to the side and shoved her mouth to my ears.

「Are you fine? If you are unwell, then lie down for a while. You—— you look like you are going to die.」

「I... I'm fine. Just a little dizzy...」

I answered unconsciously and slowly opened my eyes.

Ai Fa's blue eyes were very close to mine, which surprised me.

My nasal cavity that had grown numb from the stuffy crowd was now filled with Ai Fa's fragrance.

Ai Fa didn't need to tend to the hearth now, so the smell of meat on her grew fainter. Ai Fa's fragrance—— the smell of sweet fruit and refreshing herbs was stronger. Her scent was comforting, and gradually soothed my numb mind.

By the way... I still don't know what that sweet scent is...

I could smell the fragrance of lilo from a lot of people and their homes in Forest's Edge, the stinging scent of pico leaves, and the smell of meat and fats.

However, I couldn't smell this fragrance from anyone else.

What exactly is that? What an incredible scent. I think it's some sort of fruit, but why do I only smell it on Ai Fa...?

When she held my fingers tightly, that thought slowly faded from my mind.

「Are you really okay? Don't push yourself... Can you see me?」

「I can see you—— I'm really fine. It's okay now.」

My vision suddenly turned clear.

Aside from her eyes, Ai Fa's face that was blurred became sharp and focused. Ai Fa's slender nose bridge, soft brown cheeks, pink lips and her blonde fringe covering her forehead were all reflected in my retina with a firm sense of reality. My right fingertips that Ai Fa touched were starting to heat up.

My wobbly legs could feel the hardness of the stone path once again, and I finally snapped back into reality.

「The light has finally returned to your eyes. What happened, Asuta?」

Ai Fa's hand left the back of my neck, and she moved away.

But she still held my hand, allowing my exhausted heart to calm down.

「This is a little hard to explain. The atmosphere in this post station town is very similar to my hometown... Even though the atmosphere is the same, the streets and people are completely different, so my head was a complete mess.」

Ai Fa frowned, and looked like a grade schooler stumped by her teacher's difficult maths question.

「I don't really understand, but your face looked really bad. Don't make me worry so much.」

I was surprised by her forthright words.

Ai Fa grunted and averted her eyes. She then quietly let go of my hand and said:

「Since you have recovered, we will now head to where the stalls are. Don't ever leave my side.」

「Got it. If there is an emergency, I will hug you from behind again.」

I finally recovered enough to crack jokes, and Ai Fa kicked my leg hard mercilessly.

Part 2

Contrary to my expectation, the street scenery didn't last too long.

After walking for about ten minutes, the wooden structures were gone, and replaced by a market area set up like a flea market. Compared to earlier, this scene was incredibly messy.

The streets continued to extend northwards, and the trees on both sides of the roads had been cleared. In their place were stalls with wooden tables and makeshift roofs. There were stall owners who laid their wares on a rug on the ground. They peddle their goods to the pedestrians passing by.

「Wah, amazing.」

Most of the goods sold here were food stocks, mainly vegetables.

All sorts of vegetables I saw in the Wu clan food store—— including those that helped me a lot last night, like the cabbage like tino leaves, pula that looked like thick ginkgo leaves, a bright red

fruit that seemed to be a hybrid of a pumpkin and tomato. Burdocks that was taller than me, and a disgusting vegetable that looked like a coiled up snake... All these could be found in any stalls.

On top of that, this was a post station town built along the road, and their customers were mainly travelers. The stalls also sold large chunks of smoked jerky made from an unknown kind of meat, capes made from hides, cutlery made from wood or steel, pots, daggers, bows and arrows.

The Totos Moa I met earlier wasn't a rare animal, and it could be seen around these parts often. Some of these Totos even towed large wagons, and seemed to be the equivalent of cattle or horse in my world.

I was still a little dizzy, but I could observe this world from the perspective of curiosity and research now, not fear or horror any more.

And finally—— I realized one thing.

In this post station town, Ai Fa was more prominent than me.

As people of various skin colors and dressing were gathered in this town, I could understand why I didn't stand out.

But even though Ai Fa's attire felt wild and primitive, she shouldn't stand out too much.

There was nothing strange about clothing made from hide, and there were many people with blades on their person. Many of the women had flimsier clothes than Ai Fa, and I even saw someone wearing the fur of a feline carnivore on top of their head.

But despite that, the gaze of many of them fell on Ai Fa, and their eyes weren't friendly.

A middle aged man frowned and looked away.

A woman hid inside her stall after showing a shocked expression.

One of the men had a devious smile, and whispered to his comrade.

Some of the people walking in our direction that was surprised and detoured around us.

In this place, Ai Fa was more out of place than I was.

And of course, when they saw me sticking so close to Ai Fa, they also cast their curious gazes on me. But compared to their reaction after seeing Ai Fa, this was nothing.

A wolf walking amongst sheeps is a befitting description for this.

Ai Fa continued striding forth silently.

Her face showed no signs of anger, and she didn't do anything to intimidate the people around her. She just walked naturally like a nimble leopard.

In this crowded town, there will definitely be some ruffians.

Such as scums that drink and make merry in the middle of the day, groups wearing tattered armor and picking out flaws in a merchandize loudly. I would catch occasional glimpse of such people.

But even they were not treated as coldly by the others compared to Ai Fa.

Is everyone... looking down on 《kiba eaters》 ?

If that was so, then it was really infuriating.

Or rather, I could feel a rage welling up within me.

I heard that the denizens of Forest's Edge migrated here from the Southern Kingdom, and had the blood of foreigners within them. Were they all citizens of the Western Kingdoms? Even if that was true, the denizens of Forest's Edge already offered their souls to the Western God eight decades ago, so they were actually comrades.

As someone from another world, I didn't understand all this very well. But even so, it still made me so mad.

While I was still fuming, Ai Fa said 「This is the place」, and stopped before a stall.

It was a small wooden stall outfitted with a tented roof.

An elderly person was sitting inside, too old for me to discern the gender.

It was bright and sunny, but the elderly person still wore a hooded cloak, with a large number of accessories that seemed to be associated with curses wrapped around the fingers and wrist. They looked really weird to me.

I observed the face hidden under the hood, and found the person's features to be unexpectedly flat, with one corner of the lips raised in a creepy toad-like smile. One of the eyes was completely white and seemed blind, the other eye stared at us with its light green pupil.

「Tusks and horns from kibas? How many beasts worth?」

Even after hearing the voice, I still couldn't tell the gender.

This stall didn't seem to be selling anything. Hides from all sorts of beasts were hung on the pillar behind the old person, with no other wares in sight.

「Four of them.」

Ai Fa answered, and took out a string of them from her cape's hidden pocket.

One kiba has two horns and tusks. So four kiba's worth would mean 16 pieces. However, Ai Fa already hunted five kiba in this half month, adding the nine blessings the Wu clan gave us on top of that, she should have plenty more left inside her cape.

The elderly person took the string and carefully scrutinized them with one sparkling eye. As the elderly person caressed the white surfaces of the horns and tusks, a creepy smile finally appeared on that elderly person's face.

「There's some good stuff mixed in here. Did you hunt all these?」

「Yes.」

Which meant that all nine blessings we received was still on her chest or in the cape.

I thought she would just exchange them in the order of receipt, but this discovery filled me with joy.

「Amazing, the foundations of our lives are built on skilled hunters.」

The elderly person said, then bend down and disappeared beneath the table.

The next moment, crisp clinking sound could be heard and the elderly person finally got up again with a small bag and three small metal slabs in hand.

The slab had turned black from oxidization, but I guessed it was bronze. Roughly 10cm long and 2cm wide, it was flat and about 5mm thick. There was some sort of emblem carved at the center, but the fingers of the elderly person blocked it, so I couldn't see very well.

「This is my bonus for you. First will be four white and eight red, please confirm.」

Ai Fa accepted the bag, then emptied it onto the desk.

The slabs inside the bag were the same as the ones on the elderly person's hand—— No, instead of slabs, they were closer to plates. The small plates clinked as it fell onto the table.

I could finally see the emblem, but they were just meaningless spirals to my eyes.

Ai Fa counted the plates nimbly with her fingers.

Four dark silvery plates.

And eight dark reddish plates.

「... Hmm, the numbers are correct.」

「Alright then, I will give you this too.」

The elderly person placed the red plates on top of the pile.

「It isn't much.」

Ai Fa muttered, then returned those plates into the bag.

「It is getting dangerous around here, take care not to let anyone rob you. Really now, those people in town is only thinking about squeezing us dry. Haven't they heard the phrase 『a dead Kiwi bird lay no eggs?』」

Sorry, I never heard that before either.

「I will make a move first.」

Ai Fa turned and left after saying that.

I wanted to follow, but the raspy voice of the old person stopped me.

「Hey, you are a townsman, but dressed like a 《kiba eater》. This is the first time I have seen someone like you... Is that beautiful female hunter threatening you?」

Even the old person trading with the denizens of Forest's Edge also discriminates them.

I was furious, but I used my natural social skills and said with a thumbs up:

「Kiba is delicious. Try it if you have the chance... I will make a move first then.」

When I left the stall, Ai Fa was waiting for me two metres away.

「What are you doing? Don't leave my side. Those things on your neck are like copper plates. No one will be foolish enough to rob others of their tusks and horns in Forest's Edge, but we are on the Rock City's turf now.」

「That's true, I'm walking on rocks right now.」

I stomped the stone paved road with my heel, making a thumping sound.

By the way, my shoes were completely worn out.

「... Next will be aria and poitan.」

Ai Fa continued striding forth.

The crowd was thinning out.

The stalls were more spaced apart, and our field of vision widened.

「Ah...」

After that, I saw something amazing.

Looking in the direction we were headed, there were a row of trees behind the marketplace, and on the other side of the trees —— I could see a grey wall.

Even though it was some distance away, I could see bits of grey from the gaps in the trees.

「... That's the stone walls of the Genos castle town.」

Ai Fa glanced that way, then said emotionlessly.

「The nobles lived within those stone walls and rule over Genos.」

「Oh~...」

I didn't feel anything special.

I couldn't help feeling enraged when I realized the people in there were the ones forcing the denizens of Forest's Edge to hunt kiba.

The denizens of Forest's Edge couldn't forage for wild plants and fruits in the woods, couldn't cultivate plants, and could only hunt for kiba—— Not just that, the people in the city even call them 《kiba eaters》 mockingly.

The people of Forest's Edge protect the farmlands of Genos, so the efforts of the farmers wouldn't be destroyed by the kiba. Since they contributed to the prosperity of this town, why must they be treated so coldly? The denizens of Forest's Edge was not dissatisfied about this and still lived proudly, but I couldn't accept this.

So the people inside are the nobles of Rock City... If possible, I don't want to ever come into contact with them.

I muttered quietly in my heart as I strolled along the streets with Ai Fa.

As a mortal, there was no way for me to know—— after falling into this different world and finding a place for myself in a corner of the settlement of Forest's Edge, I will come face to face with the highest authority of Genos living in Rock city in the near future.

Part 3

「... Oh, a customer from Forest's Edge.」

A middle aged man welcomed us with a stiff smile.

We arrived at a small vegetable stall at the northernmost corner of the market place.

It was a simple and plain stall. The owner laid a piece of cloth on the ground, and displayed his vegetables on it. The roof structure looked really frail.

Behind him was a large wagon with many full bags.

「Thanks for your patronage. If you all didn't visit once every three days, the aria I picked would have dried up.」

He was in his early forties, and had a white cloth tied around his head like me. He also had a cloth on his waist, and wore sandals. His hair, eyes and beard were all dark brown in color, and had yellowish brown skin. His body was well built, and he looked strong.

But his eyes turned as cute as a pom pom dog in front of Ai Fa.

「So, are you here for aria and poitan today too? The price is the same as before, how much plates worth are you getting?」

「I want two white plates worth of poitan, two white and four red plates worth of aria.」

「Wow, that's a lot! I guess I can close shop for the day now.」

That man was warm and acted like a businessman, but the smile on his face was still very stiff.

When interacting with the denizens of Forest's Edge, the fear in his heart overwhelms his contempt.

「Two white and four red... Alright, please check.」

He placed a heavy hemp bag onto the grass besides the stall.

That's quite an amount—— Just when I was thinking that, he placed another bag that was roughly the same weight onto the ground.

The bag was rather big —— it wouldn't be strange to find it on the back of Santa Claus.

「Hey hey, Ai Fa, how many days of food did you buy?」

「Twenty.」

Ai Fa sat down crossed legged before the bag.

Looks like we have to count the amount of merchandize.

Ai Fa exchanged four kiba's worth of tusks and horns. One kiba yields ten meals, so two people for twenty days would be forty meals, the maths worked out.

But if we eat three aria and two poitan in one day, twenty days would be... 60 aria and 40 poitan? 120 and 80 respectively for two people?

「Wait! Why are we buying so much? It will take an hour to walk home from here right!?」

As I was saying that, I realized that the concept of clocks might not exist in the settlement of Forest's Edge, but there should be sundials.

No, that's not important at all. By my calculations, the aria and poitan was 200g each, which means——

120 aria weighs 24kg.

The 80 poitan was 16kg.

Considering the distance between Forest's Edge and the post station town, buying so many goods could only be described as rash.

「... Stop caring so much and count. If we keep staying here, other people won't want to come near.」

Ai Fa said to me quietly as she counted.

The middle aged man pretended he didn't hear that as he arranged his vegetables.

Given the current atmosphere, there was no way for the buyer or seller to change the quantity.

I sighed and sat down besides Ai Fa.

「Okay, the poitan is fine.」

I glanced at Ai Fa chugging the poitan back into the bag, and laid out the aria onto the grass ten by ten.

When I got to number 30, I stopped.

「Shopkeeper, I think aria was soaked in water.」

He looked shocked.

But he made no attempt to walk to us.

「That's impossible. I picked that two days earlier, and it will remain crispy for an entire month.」

「But the texture isn't right. You can't tell from its appearance, but I think it is rotten.」

「D-Don't make any trouble here. Even if you are from Forest's Edge, you have to follow the post station town's rules.」

「The post station town's rules...? Hey Ai Fa, can't we complain to the stall owner even if we bought rotten food?」

To be on the safe side, I checked with Ai Fa quietly. He was some distance away, but the middle aged man seemed to have heard that. He was still unwilling to come over, and said agitatedly:

「Hey! I-I cultivate those aria through hard work! I have eaten those that turned out sub par myself! If you have a problem with my aria, t-then don't come again!」

He shouted fiercely and looked ready for a brawl.

Ai Fa frowned and took the aria from my hand.

「Hmm... it's a little soft?」

「No, it's inedible now—— Mister, let's cut it open. If it's rotten, can you change one for me? If it's fine, I will apologize properly to you.」

「W-Whatever!」

After getting the owner's consent, I used Ai Fa's late father's knife and cut that aria in two.

As expected, the bottom half of the aria had turned purple and soft to the touch. And so, the bottom half can't be used anymore.

「See, it's rotten. Sorry for troubling you, but can you exchange one for me please?」

I extended my hand his way to show him the splitted halves of the aria. The owner's pale face immediately lost all its color.

「S... Sorry! It's my fault! You are right, please forgive me! I-I will give you back your money, please spare my life...」

The middle aged man prostrated onto the ground and offered us the metal plates.

He seemed to be emotionally unstable.

「...Ai Fa, what should we do at a time like this?」

「Who knows? We can't accept the food if we don't pay.」

「That's right. Eh, mister, please raise your head. We don't want the metal plates, but the aria. My teeth isn't tough enough to bite through something that hard.」

Maybe Donda Wu could bite off the metal plates. I thought to myself as I shook the thick shoulders of the middle aged man.

「You... You're not a denizen of Forest's Edge...?」

「My birth place is different from them. As you can see, I'm under the care of Forest's Edge right now.」

He looked up at me, his eyes were like a pom pom dog facing a pitbull.

「... You will forgive me?」

「If you exchange a new aria for us, we will forgive you.」

The middle aged man grabbed an aria displayed on his groundsheet, and hand it to us.

「Alright, thank you... This might be a bit nosy, but if you are very confident in your work, maybe you should confirm the situation before getting mad? Otherwise, it won't be good for your business.」

「... If you are not from Forest's Edge, I would have already done that.」—— I seemed to hear the owner whispered that, but his voice was too whimsical for me to tell.

The other arias were fine, and the number was correct. So we stuff all of them into the bag.

Ai Fa then took out a bunch of dried vines from the pocket in her cape—— that should be Flebaha vines —— and tied the openings of the two bags tightly.

She then held on to the excess vines, compared the weight of the two bags, and heaved the bag of aria onto her left shoulder.

「Let's go.」

Since she already bore the bag that was twice as heavy as mine, I couldn't complain even if I was a frail hearth caretaker. I still sighed and wondered how I could traverse that bridge, and heaved that bag over my shoulder to act like an out of season Santa Claus.

「Well then, we will make a move first. We might visit again in twenty days, please take care of us when that time comes.」

The stall owner glanced our way with gloomy eyes, and didn't answer.

My feelings were still wavering, and I wasn't sure if I should sympathize with him or be angry.

「Asuta, including the bonus the grandma at the exchange stall gave us, we have quite a bit of copper plates left over. Do you need to buy anything else?」

Ai Fa stopped in a space between the stalls and asked me.

I immediately put my bag down by my feet and answered: 「I need fruit wine.」

「One red copper plate can buy one bottle of fruit wine. Even if we buy two, there will still be five copper plates left.」

「Hmm~ I don't know the prices of things here at all. What about rock salt?」

「The rock salt would be three red copper plates... That's true, we need to use rock salt aside from making jerky, so we should get some.」

I discussed about what to buy with Ai Fa while walking through the crowds, which felt incredible to me.

And of course, I didn't dislike that at all.

「Well then, two copper plates left... How about buying some tino leaves and pula we tried in the Wu clan last night? I don't know how much we can buy though.」

「I'm fine with anything, so you decide.」

She entrusted me with shopping duties.

While I was tilting my head in deep thought when my stomach grumbled cutely.

「Ah! Ai Fa, how about buying some snacks at the stalls for a quick bite?」

The stalls not only sell smoked meat, many of them also sell simple snacks that could be eaten right away.

When Ai Fa heard what I said, she widen her eyes in surprise.

「If you are hungry, I have some jerky with me.」

「I don't mean that. Aside from visiting the post station town, we don't have any other chance to try different food right...? Ah, is this a taboo violation in Forest's Edge?」

「We are free to use the copper plates we earned by trading in our tusks and horns, but there isn't anyone in Forest's Edge who will spend copper plates for that.」

I see, that made sense. After all, there wasn't any concept of cuisines in Forest's Edge.

「Since you aren't interested in the food, let's go back after buying some tino leaves.」

「I already said that I will leave this to you. You can do whatever you want.」

「Hmm ~ we used the money you earned to get poitan and aria, I will feel bad if we waste the rest of the money on my hobby.」

「... What are you saying? I'm the head of the household?」

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes immediately.

I possess nine tusks and horns, but I didn't use any of it to make payment, which gave me a sense of inferiority. Was my concern harming the dignity of the house head?

After getting peacefully all this time, I didn't want to anger Ai Fa.

「Alright, I will use one copper plate to buy a new vegetable, and the last one to purchase some food that can be eaten on the spot, okay? To be honest, I'm curious about the food culture in this world.」

When she heard that, Ai Fa relaxed her brows and said 「Up to you.」

It seemed that when I was with Ai Fa, I have to play the role of the girlfriend being spoiled. Because our roles were the hearth caretaker and house head, this relationship probable made sense. But as a man from Japan, I still found it a little uncomfortable.

However, Ai Fa's look of satisfaction was very soothing for me.

Part 4

「Okay, let's get going. Time is precious, so let's pick something out along the way.」

「Yes, I will buy something that smells the tastiest.」

We went back the way we came, and brought rock salt and fruit wine along the way.

The rock salt was stuffed into my bag, and Ai Fa tied up the fruit bottle and carried it by hand.

As we continued along, I saw a vegetable stall and studied its wares.

It was too risky to buy completely unknown ingredients, so I should stick with tino leaves or pula. After asking the girl whose eyes were obviously wavering, I found out that a copper plate could buy two tino leaves or three pula. The price of these two vegetables were almost double that of aria and poitan.

Could I really buy something so extravagant? I looked up at Ai Fa, and before I could speak, she said 「Up to you.」

Since she said that, I chose the tino leaves.

Tino leaves were a vegetable that had a similar texture to cabbage, while pula had a bitter taste akin to green peeper. Both these vegetables had their own charms, but tino leaves were more practical.

After stuffing in the two tino leaves, my bag was bulging as much as Ai Fa's.

「Let's go.」

After Ai Fa turned around, I also rushed to follow.

The two bags might look the same, but the density of the contents were very different. Even though Ai Fa was burdened with 24 kg of weight, she didn't slow down at all. I was impressed.

Her body must be really well built. As a hunter, she had to move freely in the difficult terrain of the woods, that's how she trained her well toned body. Now, it's finally time for the snack I was looking forward to——

「Ah, let's pick that one.」

I stopped at the stall besides the smoked meat seller.

When I passed by here just now, this stall stimulated my sense of smell.

The business here wasn't bad, and a little girl was waiting for her food there right now.

Ai Fa nodded, and walked towards the stall without hesitation.

「How much is the food here?」

The stall was tended by a plump middle aged woman with dark brown hair and brown eyes.

Her fat face frowned on the sight of Ai Fa.

「... The small one is one red copper plate, the big one is two red copper plate.」

「Give me a small one then.」

The woman didn't answer and returned her gaze to her hands.

I looked over the head of the little girl in line, and observed the interior of the stall.

A something brown was stewing in a rather large iron pot. I knew nothing about the food sold in this stall, but I could see bite sized meat and vegetables in there. More importantly, the fragrance of the gooey stuff was appetizing, just like the smell from garlic. I never smell anything like that in Forest's Edge.

Besides the pot was a pile of ingredients that looked like grilled poitan.

It was whiter than poitan, and the texture seemed more chewy. There were two sizes, about 20cm and 30cm in diameter respectively, and about 5mm thick. After woman wrapped the content of the pot with this ingredient, she twisted the excesses at the top hard, making it into a shape of a deformed pouch.

If I had to describe it with a term, that would be 'meat bun'.

「Here, careful it's hot.」

「Thank you!」

The little girl who was about Rimee Wu answered happily and reached out her hands.

I got out of her way for her to pass through easily.

The girl then turned our way energetically—— she was surprised when she saw Ai Fa, and stood stiffly in place. The bun she just bought fell from her hands because of its inertia.

「Uwah.」

She was lucky that I caught that bun on reflex. If I didn't put down my luggage besides my feet, I wouldn't have caught it.

「Here, careful.」

The little girl's eyes were timid, but she still nodded, snatched the bun and ran off.

「... Your ordered a small one right?」

The woman said coldly and started making our share quickly.

Her skills weren't bad, but from a customer service perspective, her attitude was discomforting.

After paying the copper plate, we found an open space to sit down.

「Hurry up and eat. We are going back when you are done.」

「Okay, I'm digging in.」

I finally encountered another unknown dish after Ai Fa cooked her kiba pot for me.

Back then, the kiba pot smelled really nice, but the taste completely went contrary to my expectation. Therefore, I didn't dare to relax this time, and took a bit bite after bracing myself.

It taste——

Hmm...

「Is it good?」, Ai Fa asked disinterestedly.

As for me, I could only say 「average」.

How should I put this... It was so so.

It wasn't delicious, but not nasty either, very normal.

From the fragrance coming out from the stall, it was clear that plenty of spices were added to this snack, and smelled like a mixture of garlic and parsley. It tasted different, but wasn't unappetizing.

The meat inside the wrap was white, and the fats had completely melted. It tasted as bland as chicken breast meat.

The diced red and green vegetables were soft, and wasn't much different from cooked aria. Maybe there was aria in there.

The brown gooey ingredients should be stewed vegetables. The taste was a little sweet, and wasn't too unique to interfere with the taste of the other ingredients.

The white outer skin that reminds me of poitan was as chewy as they looked. Their texture was closer to compressed Indian naan instead of buns.

The ingredients complements and contrasted with each other, forming an average taste.

「Well, it's quite palatable, and satisfies my curiosity.」

The quantity wasn't much, so I could finish it easily. And it wasn't too unacceptably exotic.

If I had to pick a flaw, it would be it being too pricey, being equivalent to one bottle of fruit wine, or two tino leaves, or four poitan.

「Ai Fa, you want a bite?」

「No.」

I tried asking her, but Ai Fa turned me down.

「Hmm ~ I ate something boring, are the people here actually satisfied by this? I don't understand why they look down on the denizens of Forest's Edge and call them 《kiba eaters》. Kiba meat is much more delicious compared to this.」

「...Asuta, did you forget the kiba pot you ate on your first night here?」

Of course I didn't forget.

However, that was because the proper blood letting technique didn't exist in Forest's Edge.

The people in Genos lived here longer than the denizens of Forest's Edge, did they not consider a good way of eating kiba meat?

「... Before the denizens of Forest's Edge moved here eighty years ago, a large number of kibas lurked in the forest, and would attack people and farmlands. For the Genos citizens back then, kiba represented disaster.」

They weren't worthy of a taste because they were signs of disaster?

What a waste.

「I don't know the details, but they probably had plenty of meat back then. That Totos we saw had plenty of edible parts.」

「What~ they eat birds like that...? It doesn't look nasty to eat, but..」

「Anyways, the people in town fears kiba. They also fear the denizens of Forest's Edge that kills and feed on kiba. And now, they have forgotten the terror of the kiba, and the denizens of Forest's Edge is gradually replacing it as the symbol of terror... Grandma Jiba once told me that.」

「So it's just a baseless discrimination. Why didn't the denizens of Forest's Edge try to resolve this misunderstanding?」

「... Even if they fear us, we won't be inconvenienced by that.」

Was that really true?

I didn't think their unwillingness to resolve the misunderstanding was praiseworthy.

The denizens of Forest's Edge being treated coldly by the people in town was partly their fault — I felt unhappy to come to this conclusion.

「But——」

When I was about to rebuke Ai Fa, I suddenly stopped because I noticed something in the corner of my eye.

—— It was that girl from earlier.

The little girl sat on the other side of the road by herself, biting into the bun I ate earlier.

There wasn't anything special about that, but when I looked her way, she would turn her head quickly like a nimble squirrel.

She will then slowly look my way.

As the road was about ten meters wide, I couldn't discern her expression in detail. But she looked really curious.

「... She probably thinks it is incredible seeing a pale skinned man like you in Forest's Edge get up.」

Ai Fa seemed to notice the little girl and said so casually.

「I see.」

I answered as I watched the little girl from the corner of my eyes.

She was about Rimee Wu's age, maybe seven or eight years old.

Her dark brown hair reached up to her shoulders, and her skin was yellowish brown. Her orange dress was a one piece, and not a cloth wrapped around her. She had a pair of leather sandals on her feet.

Her torso and limbs were thinner than Rimee Wu, and the way she bit into the meat bun looked cute too.

I tried turning my face her way again.

My attack was sudden, and the little girl couldn't avert her gaze and remained still.

I smiled at her, and the girl looked as if she was choked by her bun. She then showed a gentle smile.

「... What are you doing?」

「Nothing, I just think that girl is really cute.」

「.....」

「 Hmm? You misunderstand! What's with your eyes? Just what kind of person do you think I am? 」

「 Shut up. Don't be so flustered... You like kids? 」

Contrary to my expectations, Ai Fa's attitude returned to normal. My agitated emotions suffered a sudden over shoulder throw.

「 If I have to say, I guess I like them. Many children will visit my dad's shop, because a lot of families will visit us. 」

「 ... I see. 」

Hmm? Did I misunderstand where this conversation was going?

I don't want you to disappear suddenly —— Ai Fa said this uncharacteristically last night. I was a little flustered when I recalled how she looked back then.

It would be better to not mention my original world for the time being.

Acting calm, I tried saying in a cheerful tone:

「 By the way, it feels depressing at the thought of carrying so much luggage back home. Isn't twenty meals too much? 」

「 I always buy this much. Or—— 」 , Ai Fa suddenly averted her eyes and added:

「 You don't need twenty meals worth of food? 」

「 Hey Ai Fa—— 」

I can't tell what my future will bring either...! Thankfully, I didn't yell that out loud.

However, I couldn't find something else to say.

Ai Fa lowered her eyelids quietly, unwilling to show me how she really felt.

「 Ai Fa, I... 」

I had to say something.

Before I could sort out my thoughts, I spoke——

But an unexpected roar and noise drowned out my words.

「 Say it to me clearly if you have any complains! Aren't you the arrogant citizens of Rock City!? 」

It was a voice of a young man who had lost his composure.

There was also a loud sound of something being damaged, and screams.

Including the voice of that little girl.

「W-What? Something happened?」

I couldn't understand the situation.

The remains of a broken wooden crate was scattered on the streets, along with an unknown yellow fruit. Two men was wrestling in the middle of the scattered items.

They were really close to that little girl.

The other people had retreated away to not get caught in the dispute, only that girl was sitting weakly on the ground with a fearful face.

「Hey, is that...?」

Before I could sound her out, Ai Fa had stood up deftly.

There was an intimidating gleam in her eyes as she glared at the men.

One of the two men fighting on the road in broad day light—— was from Forest's Edge.

Part 5

It was an unfamiliar young man.

But he was definitely a denizen of Forest's Edge.

He had a kiba cape draped over him, a shirt and waist cloth with complicated swirling designs, and two blades on his waist. He was also wearing a necklace of tusks and horns.

He had a messy head of dark brown hair, light tanned skin and blue fiery eyes.

The man wasn't too tall, had a body of solid muscles and a serious face like a stone lion.

This young man from Forest's Edge grabbed the chest of a plump man who seemed to be a merchant. He made that man's round face turned red by constricting the man's neck.

「Asuta, stay here.」

Ai Fa left these words and walked quickly into the crowd. She was still holding onto the bottle of fruit wine for some reason.

I couldn't just watch idly by. I wasn't suited to mediate a dispute between parties, but I couldn't leave that poor little girl alone.

Ai Fa pushed through the wall of people and strolled into the center of the encirclement. On the other hand, I ran around the wall of people and quietly went towards the little girl.

「Say it again. Who is the 『stinky kiba eater』 you are referring to? You said 『even the food in my hand stinks now』 right? Say it louder so I can hear you clearly, oh great citizen of Rock City.」

This young man from Forest's Edge seemed to be drunk.

He held a familiar bottle in one hand, and his red face and shrill voice was definitely not because of his rage.

Someone is actually so drunk in broad daylight, don't he need to hunt kiba?

I thought as I quickly rush towards the little girl.

I was five meters away from my goal when another series of screams came.

Along with an ominous shattering sound.

The man from Forest's Edge tossed aside the bottle filled with fruit wine, and pull out a knife.

It was a knife, but the blade was as thick as a machete, and about 20cm long. This weapon could even cut through kiba hide and meat, and was rather dangerous.

He actually draw his blade! That's too unreasonable!

I couldn't take my time going the long way around. I pushed aside the gawkers and charged out.

The girl's half eaten bun fell to the ground, and the two men fighting trampled all over it. They were that close to her.

At this moment —— another sound erupted.

Ai Fa hit the back of that man's head hard with the fruit wine bottle in her hand.

The bottle shattered and the fragrance of the fruit wine spread across the road.

That man stumbled and fell onto the ground—— I grabbed the little girl before he fell onto her.

「Retard, if you like wine so much, you can have my share!」

Ai Fa cold steely voice tore through all the noise.

「It is a serious taboo for the people of Forest's Edge to cause any trouble in Rock City. You are a disgrace to Forest's Edge.」

That man held the back of his head while he squatted. He lift his head and looked up at Ai Fa.

Intense hatred and grudge welled up within his murky eyes, as if he had seen something he loathed.

「You are the female hunter from house Fa... How dare you do this to me, you think I will let this go so easily...?」

「Who is the one that failed to follow the rules of Forest's Edge? There is no shame in my actions.」

「Uwah... What a cool girl.」

The one who said that wasn't the man from Forest's Edge.

It was an unfamiliar man, who knelt beside me before I even noticed.

「This is the first time I have seen a female hunter. If that necklace is the real thing, that's really praiseworthy.」

「W-What do you want?」

In order to not get in Ai Fa's way, I got up and moved away from the center of the dispute, and asked the man following behind me.

「Me? I'm just a normal pedestrian. I wanted to protect that poor girl over there, but you got ahead of me.」

That man had a whimsical presence.

He had a head of golden brown locks I had never seen in Forest's Edge or the post station town before. His skin seemed untainted by the sun and was ivory in color. His pupils had a tint of purple.

Because he had button up his long cloak, I couldn't see his body. But he had a long face and immense height, and was slouching to bring his face near me.

He had a pair of drooping eyes, high nose bridge and messy hair and beard. His strangely colored pupils had both the maturity of age and a childish glow, making it hard to discern his age.

「Ara, looks like the lazy officials have finally made their move.」

I followed the man's extended finger, and saw a group of men with spears hurriedly moving through the crowd.

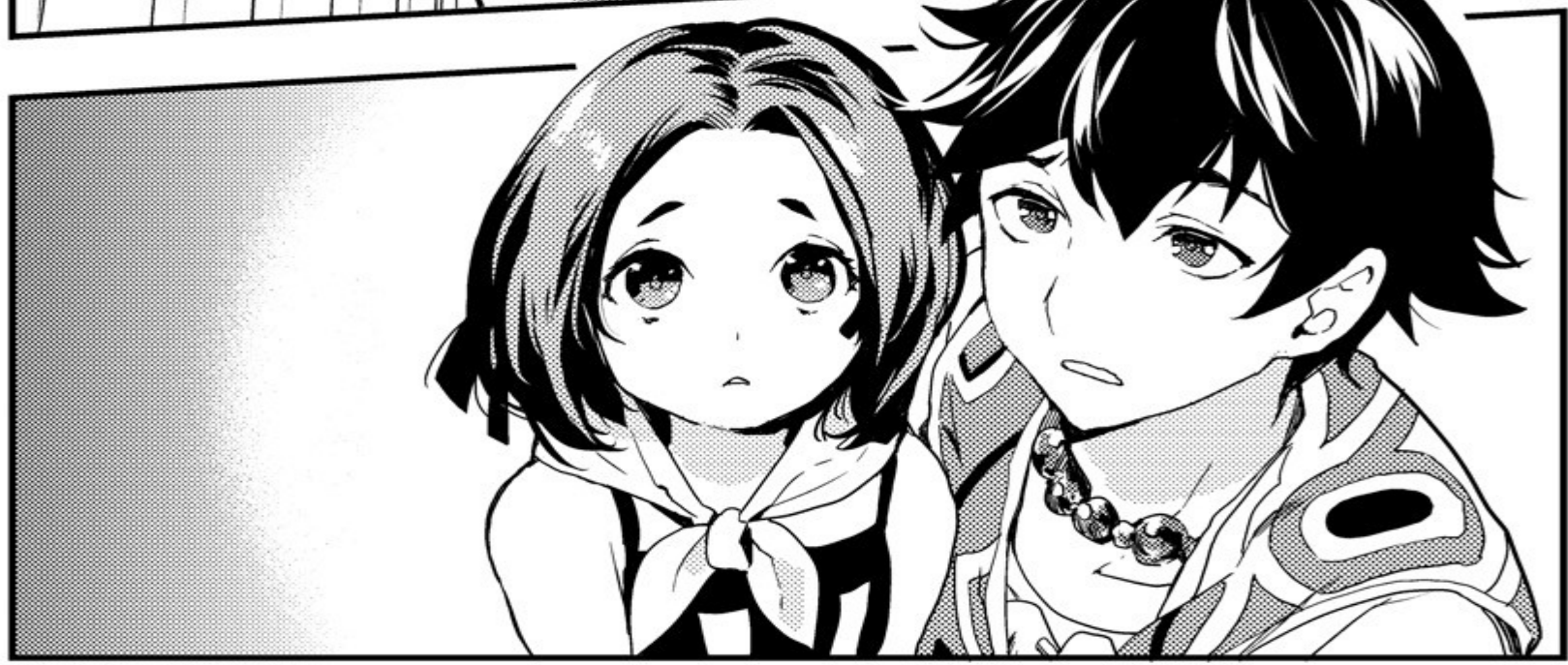
「What are you lot doing in the middle of the road!?!」

The group of strong men wore leather helmet, leather chest protectors and had yellowish brown skin. From their professional dressing, they were probably the guards that maintains the peace within the city.

When I was about to sigh in relief—— I saw them point the sharp end of their spears at Ai Fa, which made me stood stiff.

The girl in my arms were trembling.

「Denizens of Forest's Edge... Hey! You are prohibited from causing any incidents in this post station town! Is the people of Forest's Edge trying to violate the agreement you made with Marquis Genos!?!」



It seemed a prerequisite of being a guard was to not be fearful of denizens from Forest's Edge.

However, I feel that their eyes and faces were a little too agitated.

「... In order to honor that agreement, I even went as far as to hit that retard who broke this taboo.」

Ai Fa glared at the steel blade at her nose, and said emotionlessly.

The guards shift their gaze to the man squatting down.

That man—— showed an incredibly ugly expression.

「Guards of Rock City... I'm Doddo Tsun from the Tsun clan.」

His voice was like venom that dripped from his ugly lips onto the streets.

「Even lowly officials like you know me too right? I'm from the ruling Tsun clan of Forest's Edge... arrest that woman.」

The guards looked at each other confusedly.

The man who called himself Doddo Tsun glared at them and continued:

「That woman suddenly attacked me when I was walking along the streets! You can understand just by seeing this situation, right? I'm not at fault at all! It's this dumb woman who violated the taboo of Forest's Edge, and broke the agreement between Forest's Edge and Genos!」

「It's a Tsun clan member...」, I was taken aback when the guards retracted their spears.

Their spears were still pointed at Ai Fa.

「Woman, come to the guards room with us, we will interrogate you about your crimes... Son of the Tsun clan, we need you to make a trip down with us, do you agree?」

「Of course...」, Doddo Tsun stood up and licked his lips.

I couldn't help but shout——

But someone did so before me.

It was the little girl in my arms.

「No! That man is the one who started the trouble, and that woman stopped him!」

The entire street turned dead quiet.

It seemed—— that there was something ominous about this silence.

「... Son of the Tsun clan, what's going on here?」

One of the guards looked Doddo Tsun's way with a stern face.

Doddo Tsun then said with a smile:

「This is baseless slander. Why don't you ask the people around you. Since things had gotten this serious, there should many who saw how the entire scene unfold.」

Then, something unbelievable happened——

The crowd that was watching on all frowned and slowly left.

「Ara ara, that's wrong.」

The man in a long cloak muttered dumbfounded.

He stood up straight and was almost a head taller than me as expected.

In terms of height, he should be comparable to Donda Wu. But he hunches his back and slouches his shoulders, and with his rather slender built, he felt like a frail mantis.

But that wasn't important now.

「Damn it—— Oh right, where is that guy being grabbed by him...?」

「When that drunkard got sent flying, that guy left hurriedly without even saying thanks. This is a problem.」

I gritted my teeth and decided to confront the guards.

At this point, Doddo Tsun's murky eyes gaze my way.

His face was twisted with glee, and it sent a chill down my spine.

「Guards of Rock City, that brat is a foreigner, but became a part of Forest's Edge recently. He is probably a comrade of this fool, is he forcing that girl to say those foolish things?」

The blade that was at Doddo Tsun nose earlier was now pointed my way.

「Hey, put down that girl.」

The next instant the girl grabbed my neck tightly and said:

「Don't wanna! This onii-san saved Tara! That man is the one who did bad things, so why don't you believe me!?!」

「I will interrogate them in the guard house later. Enough, run on home.」

「Don't wanna!」

「Well well, it's because of this bureaucratic style that is stopping you from earning the citizen's respect. You think it's troublesome to deal with the Forest's Edge denizens, so you don't spend the effort to seek out the truth. That isn't encourageable.」

Someone interjected suddenly. And of course it was the cloaked man.

Everyone acted before I could, so I didn't have any chance to speak at all.

「What do you want? Those not involved should just stand aside.」

「Unfortunately, I'm not involved with this incident, but I witnessed the entire thing. I might be just a bystander, but my testimony still have some value and reliability correct? 」

After the man said that with grandiose, he continued:

「The fruit wine seller here and his friend who seemed to be a merchant were quietly pointing fingers and laughing at that gentleman from Forest's Edge. This gentleman became agitated, grabbed that merchant and threw that box of fruit wine onto the streets. The fruit wine seller fled and this gentleman yelled: 『Say it to me clearly if you have any complains! Aren't you the arrogant citizens of Rock City!?』, or something like that.」

The little girl snickered.

Because his voice was too lacking in tension.

「Hmm? Was my impression not good enough? Never mind... They then started quarreling. 『I-I didn't say anything.』 『Liar!』 『It's the truth!』 『I heard you say that, the ears of denizens from Forest's Edge are built different from rotten ears like yours!』 『S-Save me!』 『Say it again. Who is the 『stinky kiba eater』 you are referring to? You said 『even the food in my hand stinks now』 right? Say it louder so I can hear you clearly, oh great citizen of Rock City.』 ... That's the gist of what happened.」

The shocking thing was, this man recalled their conversation completely.

The guards looked troubled, and Doddo Tsun glared at that man with eyes like wild dogs.

And Ai Fa——

This was the most surprised expression I have ever seen her made.

「This gentleman toss the wine bottle in his hand aside, and pulled out a knife from his waist. That sweet smelling thing over there is the remnants of the bottle, and his knife is right over here.」

Doddo Tsun and the guards shifted their surprised gaze to our feet.

And a knife without any crossguard was right there.

A leather sheath was still hanging on Doddo Tsun's waist.

「At this point, that lady appeared on scene. She smashed her fruit wine bottle into the back of his head, then calmly said: 『Retard, if you like wine so much, you can have my share! 』」

The little girl couldn't hold it in any longer and laughed out softly.

His voice was really amusing.

Ai Fa's surprised face suddenly turned gloomy.

「She then said: 『It is a serious taboo for the people of Forest's Edge to cause any trouble in Rock City. You are a disgrace to Forest's Edge』 … That should be enough. Gentlemen, can you take this into consideration when you perform your interrogation?」

All the guards showed an annoyed face. One of them turned to Doddo Tsun and said:

「Son of the Tsun clan, what that man described——」

「That's all nonsense! Baseless slander!」

Doddo Tsun's blue eyes turned bloodshot and he let loose a shrill yell.

But it seemed that —— the officials were not convinced.

「If that is so, then you need to have a logical explanation. You should be the only one here who refutes what I said. Since you claim that I'm lying, then explain the smashed box over there, the broken fruit wine bottle and why your knife is on the ground.」

He said something vicious, but his expression remained casual.

Unlike Jiza Wu whose thoughts could not be read, this man had an easy going attitude—— He was calm and explained his thoughts leisurely.

「… Enough. I will take all of you back to the guards office, so all of you have to report there.」

「What? That's troubling. I have an appointment with Marquis Genos later.」

The man said something incredible.

The guards were scared shitless.

「It's already passed the agreed time, I will feel bad if I go any later. If you want me to go with you, can you relay that to Marquis Genos first?」

「Why you... No, sir, may I know...?」

「Don't be so afraid. I'm just a friendly commoner. I'm Kamyua Yost, a guardian that ensures the safety of travelers.」

After saying so, that man showed a necklace hanging on his neck from the gap between his cloak. It was a silver chain with a brightly colored stone similar to agate. It was an elegantly crafted necklace.

「I happened to be working as a guardian for Marquis Genos when he was traveling to the capital, that's how we get to know one another. I don't have any titles or peerage, so fear not... Ah, this is the Genos castle town pass bestowed to me by Marquis Marustein Genos.」

He then took out another item. It was a thin and flat glimmering silver plate, which was completely different from the copper plate I saw earlier. It was the size of a credit card, with unfamiliar designs carved on it, drawing attention to its glamorous status.

When the guards saw that silver plate, they stood stiff with their face pale.

At this moment, I noticed one thing —— This uncle was rather mischievous.

Even though everyone present were looking at this slender man who call himself Kamyua Yost with complicated expressions, he was still smiling easily and happily.

Part 6

「So, isn't it great that things are resolved smoothly?」

After the guards left with Doddo Tsun, the strange man named Kamyua Yost stayed behind with us.

We sat back at that empty place we were at earlier. Seated between the tensed Ai Fa and the troubled me was Kamyua Yost who was smiling carefreely.

「...Thank you for helping us in our time of need.」

Ai Fa said stoically, and lowered her head politely in thanks.

「You are really cautious.」 the man said with a smile.

「I didn't help at all, I merely stated what I witnessed. As a citizen of the western god Selva, it is my obligation to do so.」

In the end, the guards didn't bring us to the guard house.

They only took Doddo Tsun with them. However, Doddo Tsun wouldn't be punished at all.

『It's not that big of a deal right? A denizen from Forest's Edge did something unreasonable, and someone else from Forest's Edge stopped him. It was wrong of him to pull a knife, but there is no need to escalate this matter right?』

The guards agreed with Kamyua Yost and the incident was concluded.

They took away Doddo Tsun. Their official statement was to wait for him to wake up from his stupor, but they would probably just detain him for a short while.

Hurry on back to Forest's Edge—— the eyes of the guards were saying that to us strongly.

But we didn't leave, and sat opposite this strange man we met for the first time.

「Erm... Don't you have an important matter to attend to? 」

「What? 」

Kamyua Yost shook his head in response:

「You mean that matter with Marquis Genos? That's a lie. I do have an appointment with him, but I just need to show up at dinner, and there's still plenty of time. 」

He was a sly man indeed.

A cunning smile appeared on Kamyua Yost's thin face, and his eyes suddenly glanced to the side.

「That is quite a troublesome matter. Little Miss, are you hurt? 」

「No! Because this onii-chan saved me! 」

The one answering was the little girl who called herself Tara. And 『onii-chan』 meant me.

Tara bit into a bun with a big smile. Doddo Tsun trampled all over the bun she bought, so Kamyua Yost bought her a new one.

「Oh, right, this thing too——」, Kamyua reached inside his cloak.

And as if he was performing magic, he pulled out a fruit wine.

He uncorked it with his boney fingers, took a sip, then replaced the cork before handing the bottle to Ai Fa.

「As you can see, it's not poisoned. Will you accept this? 」

「... I have no reason to receive your charity. 」

「You are really cautious! I'm deeply moved by your selfless act of protecting the order in the post station town and the rules of Forest's Edge! Can't that be the reason? 」

Ai Fa showed a disgusted face.

Kamyua Yost was still smiling as he gently patted Tara's petite head.

「It's the same for Tara. I'm moved by how this child muster her courage to help her benefactor, that's why I treated her to a Kimilz meat bun... Tara, is it good? 」

「Yes! Thank you uncle!」

「Uncle huh... it's right to call me that, I'm almost thirty.」

So he wasn't thirty yet—— I was a bit surprised.

Speaking of which, if he shave off his messy beard, he would look young... No, not at all. His expression and demeanour were casual, instead of an uncle, he looked closer to being an old man.

「So, what do you think? Will you accept this fruit wine...? Or are you still vexed about that brute not having to answer for his crimes? He is from the Tsun clan after all, I think it's better not to escalate the matter.」

What he said shocked me again.

Was the situation in Forest's Edge within his grasp too?

「Hmm? What's so strange about that? I have never stepped into the Forest's Edge of Morga before, but I still know the name of the Chief clan in Forest's Edge. I like this post station town a lot, and often see the denizens of Forest's Edge here... But this is the first time I'm speaking with a denizen of Forest's Edge.」

His big mouth under his long thin nose rose in a satisfied smile.

「On top of that, you are a really beautiful female hunter, which made me even happier. As a sign of respect to your beauty, I hope you can accept this bottle of fruit wine.」

I looked at Ai Fa's face timidly.

Ah... She was beyond furious, and her brows tightly knotted in a frown.

「Hmm, did I say anything that offended you? I only praised your looks, said that you're beautiful and compliment your noble actions.」

「.....」

「It's useless... Then, what about you?」

「W-What?」

「They call me 《Whirlwind of the north》, but you rescued Tara before I did, and I wished to show my respect and compliments. Will you accept this?」

Judging from the current mood, I shouldn't accept.

「By the way, what does whirlwind of the north mean anyway?」

「That's a nickname my colleagues gave me. This hair color is rare in the west... Because my birth place is in the north.」

Ai Fa's face changed a little when she heard that.

Her cat-like eyes stared right at Kamyua Yost with some lingering hostility.

「Kamyua Yost, Did you come from the northern kingdom Mahyudora?」

「Just call me Kamyua... Speaking of which, I still don't know your names. It's fine even if you make wild lies, can you tell me how to address you?」

His tone would definitely trigger Ai Fa. She raised her brow and said:

「I'm head of the Fa house, Ai Fa.」

「Ah, I'm a member of the Fa house, Asuta.」

「Ai Fa and Asuta huh. Nice names... Right, I'm from the north. My mother hails from Mahyudora while my father is from Selva. Since a century ago, the north and west bore deep animosity towards each other, and I'm a child born from these two nations. I spent my childhood in the north until my mother's death before coming here to the west. I couldn't find proper work because of my heritage, so I had to scrap for a living as a guardian.」

On Kamyua Yost's waist was a sword that had a long and thin blade.

「Speaking of which, Ai Fa, your hair color looked rather similar to mine.」

Kamyua's purple eyes narrowed as if he was looking at something glaring, and he said to Ai Fa:

「I heard that the people in Forest's Edge are the descendants of refugees who escaped from the south. Given how far apart the north and south are, it's unlikely for them to have any blood relations. So why do you have a head of blonde hair?」

「... There's no special reason for this. People with this hair color will appear in Forest's Edge from time to time, my mother also had blonde hair.」

「I see. It's the same with my mother.」

Kamyua Yost smiled innocently, and Ai Fa turned her head away as if she was annoyed.

I felt that somehow—— Ai Fa's attitude was a little strange.

「Anyway, I have been interested in the denizens of Forest's Edge for a long time now. They offered their souls to another god while they were still alive, there are few who have experienced anything like that. So I feel close to them one sided. Therefore, I'm very glad that the first people from Forest's Edge that I get to speak to are people like you.」

「.....」

「So, what's your business with us?」

Ai Fa seemed uninterested, so I had to interject.

「Thank you for helping us out of a bind, but we have work to do back in Forest's Edge. It's about time for us to go now...」

「Is that so? It's regrettable, so let's get into the topic... Actually, I took a job to guard a caravan in Genos heading to the eastern kingdom. When the time comes, we hope to be granted passage through the Forest's Edge settlement.」

I was very surprised by this, but Ai Fa's reaction was very cold.

「... The chief Tsun clan is responsible for this job.」

「Yes, of course I know that. But after meeting the son of the Tsun clan today, it was regrettable, but I dismissed the idea of asking them to do this. They aren't trustworthy at all.」

He had an innocent expression, but Kamyua Yost didn't mince his words.

「Well, I already warned Marquis Genos before that every time an incident happens in the post station town, it's always because of the Tsun clan. The denizens of Forest's Edge keep to themselves and follows the rules stubbornly, but the Tsun clan are nasty and disregards the rules. This makes me wonder if the Marquis' side are part of the problem too...」

「It's the people of Rock City that made the Tsun clan so depraved.」

Ai Fa cut off Kamyua Yost.

A blue flame rages in her eyes.

「The people inside the city made the Tsun clan wealthy, which in turn caused them to discard the pride of Forest's Edge, not hunting kiba properly. They will drink and make merry all day and engrossed themselves in pleasures of the flesh. The people in the city needs to take full responsibility for this.」

「By making them wealth, do you mean the bonus paid out to them once every three months? That is such a meagre sum though.」

「The Tsun clan hoarded all of it. They spend that money on lavish pleasure.」

I was probably the one who was most surprised here.

Tara had a blank face after finishing her bun, while Kamyua Yost looked as if he already knew.

「I guess as much. That money is meant to be a reward for protecting Genos from the threat of kibas, but the chief clan didn't share it with the people of Forest's Edge who devoted themselves to this work, and only benefited his own family to party... Why haven't the denizens of Forest's Edge revolted yet?」

「We don't need the charity from Rock City, we hunt kiba simply for the sake of survival.」

「What a noble personality...! You are really stubborn though.」

Kamyua Yost smiled wryly again as he ruffled his messy blonde hair.

「If you wish to restore order in Forest's Edge, I might be able to give you a hand.」

「.....」

「And of course, I wouldn't agitate the Tsun clan rashly, they are still the chief clan of Forest's Edge after all. If the power of Forest's Edge to hunt kiba wanes because they lose their chief clan, it will be terrible. The kiba will rampage in the Morga forest once more and destroy the farmlands... That's why Marquis Genos don't dare to act even if he can see that the Tsun clan is a little depraved.」

「.....」

「Hence, I need to ask you a question. If the Tsun clan loses their standing, are there any other clans that can rule over Forest's Edge in their place?」

Speaking of a force that could rival the Tsun clan, the existence of the Wu clan immediately surfaced in my mind.

But Ai Fa didn't say a word.

Glimmers of hate gradually shone in her eyes.

「After all, Rock City can only interact with Forest's Edge through the Tsun clan, so they cut off all negative news against them. Furthermore, they seldom appear outside the city walls, so a commoner who knows Marquis Genos like me, and someone who isn't close to the Tsun clan like you, our meeting will be like erecting a bridge between Rock City and Forest's Edge.」

「What good does that do for you?」

Kamyua Yost laughed again when he heard me say that.

「Gains and losses aside, aren't we all children of the western god Selva? In that sense, we are brethren, and it is only natural to lend a hand to a brethren in need.」

「.....」

「That's just pleasantries. Like I said, I have an one sided sense of camaraderie towards the denizens of Forest's Edge. I feel that way because of your virtuousness. I don't respect lazy bums who got drunk at noon and don't hunt kiba properly—— That's how it is.」

I was confused.

His words are insincere —— I didn't think that way, but he likes to act the goat too much, so I couldn't tell what he was really thinking.

As for Ai Fa, a strong defiance was burning in her eyes.

「Kamyua Yost, you are from Rock City. If the people from Rock City wants to harm the denizens of Forest's Edge—— you will become an enemy of Forest's Edge.」

「Is that so, does that applies to the decadent Tsun clan too?」

「If the Tsun clan have to be punished, they should be by the hands of the Forest's Edge denizens. The disgrace of Forest's Edge should be cleansed by Forest's Edge itself. And finally—— It's the people from Rock City that led to the Tsun clan becoming depraved.」

Ai Fa then spat out fiercely:

「The people of Rock City... cannot be trusted.」

Her fiery eyes signifies her pride as a hunter.

But even so, Kamyua Yost still said casually with a smile:

「You are really a noble and virtuous person. Ai Fa, you are beautiful.」

「... Are you ridiculing me?」

「I'm complimenting your beauty, how is that ridiculing you?—— Ara, look, you made Tara scared.」

I was surprised after hearing that. I turned my head and found Tara holding tightly to Kamyua Yost's arm and shaking.

「Can't be helped then, let's call it a day. If we are too careless, the son from the Tsun clan might appear again.」

「... It's just for today. Be it tomorrow or the day after, we won't ever meet again.」

「Who can be sure? You can't wait for a chance to come, you have to create one yourself.」

Kamyua Yost picked up the sword with his right hand, held the little girl's hand with his left, then stood up and said:

「Ai Fa and Asuta, I'm really glad to have met you both today. I will place the fruit wine right here to commemorate our meeting today. If you don't need it, then let it return to the earth... See you around.」

Chapter 2 - Remuneration and Resolve

Part 1

「Ah, I can see the water source, it feels that we're finally home.」

I muttered to myself with ragged breath, and Ai Fa who has been quiet all this while finally turned back.

「What's with your voice? Asuta, your stamina is just like a ten years old child.」

「Yeah, I just need to beat Rimee Wu in that... Ai Fa, you are finally willing to talk to me.」

「Hmmp.」

Ai Fa faced forward again and sped up.

「Ah, wait for me! At least let me drink some water! My throat is completely parched since just now!」

I just hiked through the hill for an hour with over 16kg of load after all. The ropes had cut into my shoulder, and my legs and waist was trembling. I over exerted myself physically today, maybe even more than that day when we erected the stove.

By the way, how I did I cross that scary suspension bridge? In order to carry my baggage, Ai Fa made two trips, and she even went another time to guide me over while holding my hand. She was probably worried that her panicky family member would hug her again. Anyways, there were plenty of embarrassing things in my life that I didn't want Rimee Wu to know.

Let's hydrate myself first.

「What a wimp...」

While Ai Fa's words stabbed deep into my head, I scooped up the clear water flowing between the rocks and drank it.

Absolutely refreshing.

Ai Fa who didn't speak with me for a long time changed her tone and continued:

「...Asuta, why aren't you asking anything.」

「Hmm? You mean what that uncle said? I have loads of things to ask, but you will tell me things about this world every night.」

I rubbed my hands on my knees, and looked up at Ai Fa's face as I caught my breath

「You will choose what to tell me based on your judgement. I won't find any faults in your judgement, since I don't really understand this world too well yet.」

「.....」

「However, if you are already calm, then I want to discuss something with you... What do you think about that uncle?」

I cast my gaze to my feet when I said that.

Over there was a large bag filled with poitan and tino leaves, and bottle of fruit wine.

Ai Fa wanted to leave the fruit wine behind and go back, but I think the fruit wine wasn't at fault in the first place, so I volunteered to bring it back. The bottle's design was different from the usual kind, which made me curious what kind of wine this was.

「He is a weird guy, but I don't think he is a bad man. I'm a bit curious about what you think of him.」

「... Not worth mentioning.」

「You're going already? Hey, wait!」

With no other choice, I heaved up the bag and chased after Ai Fa painstakingly.

Despite her heavy baggage, Ai Fa's strides were steady.

「I won't force you if you don't want to talk about it, but you seemed really tense. You're not good with guys like him?」

「... I have nothing to say with people from the city.」

「But you said plenty. Now that you mentioned it, I'm more of an outsider compared to that uncle, right? If you try talking to him, you two might get along well.」

「... You think I get along with you?」

「Ahaha! I already noticed, but you are still angry! The things you have been saying made my heart aches!」

「... I don't mean it.」

Ai Fa's eyes turned gloomy.

「Am I acting weird?」

「Weird or not huh... I thought you were in serious thought about something. You seemed troubled after we set off from the post station town.」

「I don't know. This is the first time I spoke with someone from the city, my mind is a mess.」

She looked at me with gloomy eyes.

Like a little kid who was lost.

「Am I weird?」

「... No, you're not weird at all.」

I said firmly.

「It's only natural for you to be confused after hearing someone say that so suddenly. I only half understand what that guy said, but for you—— For the denizens of Forest's Edge, this will affect your future.」

「.....」

「I already told you a long time ago, you don't need to shoulder such a big responsibility. If you don't think you can handle it, then just forget it ever happened.」

What I said was rather irresponsible.

But half of it was my sincere thoughts.

If what Kamyua Yost said was true—— the Tsun house will lose power, and the Wu house will take over Forest's Edge, things might end peacefully.

However, things wouldn't proceed so smoothly.

We had yet to understand Donda Wu. If that burly and violent man replaced the Tsun house and rule Forest's Edge in their stead, he might be more of a tyrant than the Tsun house. And we wouldn't be able to raise our head before Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba.

On the other hand, what that uncle said might be just a load of rubbish. Kamyua Yost seemed to have a good grasp of the situation in Forest's Edge. He might be trying to tease us on a whim, so we couldn't believe him so easily.

I want to believe his words, and I hope he had the authority to strip the Tsun house of their chief status.

That way, we wouldn't need to look out for that despicable Diga Tsun. And we made an enemy with another Tsun house member today.

The man who called himself Doddo Tsun was a small fry like Diga Tsun, but someone so shameless was more scary. He got drunk in the afternoon and create trouble in the post station town. It was hard for me to imagine that someone so crude was living in Forest's Edge.

They were not qualified to rule Forest's Edge—— That was definitely so.

Darum Wu of the Wu house might be a problematic character, but he isn't as bad as these guys. If Darum Wu is a wolf, then they are just wild dogs... No, that will be rude to the wild dogs.

In the end, he is still 「human」.

Probably someone 「poisoned by civilization」.

「... You also turned quiet too.」

A voice of a girl throwing a tantrum reached my ears.

I was wondering who it was, but it was just Ai Fa.

「Asuta, you're so troubled too, but you want me to forget about this.」

Ai Fa would sometimes show an expression that looked younger than her age.

Moments like this always made me waver—— I was rather flustered now too.

「No, I'm not troubling over something that deep. I'm just thinking that dogs exist in this world too.」

「Dogs? You mean the descendants of Farbu wolves that lived amongst humans being friends of mankind? That's just a legend in the western kingdom, there's no telling if it is true.」

Ai Fa pouted.

「If you want to eat that dog thing, then go to Rock City. I don't want any part of that.」

She turned her head to the side really hard.

My mind was a mess, wondering if I should be angry or soothe her.

「I get it! I get it! Let's talk about happy things! Since our match with Donda Wu is over, I want to try out new dishes. We have been taste testing steaks this few days, so my jaws are tired.」

Ai Fa kept her head turned and glance at me sideways.

「... Will the new dish be tastier than hamburg steak?」

「We will only know if we try. By the way, the steaks are delicious right?」

「That's true... But I still prefer hamburg steak.」

「Huh!? You told me that the steaks are as tasty as hamburg steak right? That's why I made up my mind to use steaks in my match with Donda Wu.」

「Steaks are as tasty as hamburg steak... But I still prefer hamburg steak.」

I was planning to rebuke her, but I forgot what I wanted to say from surprise.

Because I realized that this was the first time Ai Fa used the term 「prefer」 .

Ai Fa once said that 「food has no distinction of being delicious or not」 , but not only did she said 「tasty」 , she even used the term 「prefer」 .

To me, this was a dramatic change.

「... You once said that eating soft meat all the time will make our teeth weak, but there's no need to worry about it if I continue to chew on jerky.」

Ai Fa lowered her face that was turned away a little, then looked up at me sideways with her mouth slightly pouting. That expression of hers was so sly.

It was even worse since she didn't show that face on purpose.

「So, I still prefer hamburg steak.」

「I-I get it. I will make hamburg steak tomorrow, so let's try out a new dish today first.」

Ai Fa lowered her head further, she seemed to be suppressing a smile.

I could only say that it was a good thing that both of my hands were full.

We just concluded our match with Donda Wu, even though there were new troubles in our hearts, it shouldn't be too much to ask if we spent this day leisurely right? We could then rest up and worry about Kamyua Yost's issue tomorrow! When we reached our home with this in mind, another new problem was there waiting for Ai Fa and me.

It came in the form of a matching couple.

They were Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min who would be wed in six days.



Part 2

「Head of the Fa house Ai Fa, and house member Asuta, we have been waiting for your return.」

Kaslan Lutim's face was squarish, and he had a pair of large eyes and a large nose. He wasn't handsome, but emitted an air of honesty and sincerity. He said after a deep bow:

「It's great to see you, it's almost time for us to return to the Lutim house.」

Ema Min bundled her dark brown hair up tidily, and her mature face showed hints of intelligence and cheerfulness. She bowed too.

「Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min. What are you doing here?」

Ai Fa had not switched to her house head expression yet, and asked them puzzledly. The two of them smiled and answered as if they had agreed on this in advance:

「We have some urgent matters for the two of you, so we came to visit.」

To be honest, I had an ominous feeling when I heard him said that.

We have already asked Donda Wu to turn down the matter of tending the hearth for the wedding when we went home in the morning.

But even so, the ominous feeling persisted.

「It's too conspicuous to stay here, come on in... Asuta, care take their steel.」

Ai Fa grabbed my bag of poitan with her hand that was holding the fruit wine, and hurried into the house.

I was momentarily surprised, and quickly took the long and short blades Kaslan Lutim proffered to me.

「P-Please come in.」

Ever since Rimee Wu's visit quite some time ago, we finally have some guest.

I didn't know how to receive them at all.

Ai Fa finally returned from the food store, and sat down in the seat of honor in the large room. The two guest sat down an adequate distance away opposite Ai Fa.

I was at a loss, and finally knelt down besides Ai Fa, with the blades placed right beside me.

Since no one complained, my actions probably didn't violate any customs of Forest's Edge.

「First, we want to thank you both. Ai Fa and Asuta of house Fa, thank you for the amazing feast you prepared for us last night.」

「That's right, dinner last night was delicious. For us, this irreplaceable pre wedding celebration was a joyous night we will never forget.」

When I hear the honest and sincere thanks from the both of them, I wanted to thank them too.

Or rather... I just came back from the motley post station town, so the sight of these two who represented innocence and purity gave me an entirely different impression from last night.

Kaslan Lutim was a young man with such forthright eyes.

Ema Min was actually a woman with such a bright and clear expression.

I wasn't sure if it was just their family, or this differs by the individuals, but many of the Wu house members emits dazzling life force. But these two had a more stable quality, as tenacious as a rooted tree.

Ai Fa finally reverted to her serious expression as a house head. Sitting with one knee up, she looked at them and said:

「We are glad to tend to the Wu house's hearth too—— But what are you referring to when you mentioned you have a request for us? We have already rejected the request about the wedding through Donda Wu.」

After Ai Fa got right to the point, the two of them said 「yes」 at the same time, and lowered their heads:

「That's the matter we would like to discuss with you two! Back then, it was my father Dan Lutim who proposed this matter which goes against the customs of Forest's Edge when we heard his proposal...」

「We also think it is a wonderful idea. If it comes through, it would be a truly blissful night.」

Their hearts were so in sync even before the wedding.

Their expressions and eyes were filled with pure longing and joy—— I could feel their honest character from how they try their best to convey their thoughts.

But these were two different matters.

Of all the kin house of the Wu house, Kaslan Lutim was the heir to the strongest Lutim main house. It would be too heavy a responsibility for me to care take the hearth during his wedding.

I could only count on Ai Fa's decisiveness.

「Neither the Lutim house nor Min house has deep relations with the Fa house, so the Fa house can't bear such a heavy responsibility. A family joyous occasions should be shared with your kins... Asuta already said that last night.」

She was right.

I nodded in agreement.

The next instance, Kaslan Lutim looked at me with his forthright eyes.

「Asuta, I heard that you are a Fa house member, but didn't come from Forest's Edge, but a foreign country. And that you work as a chef in your hometown.」

「Yes, I might just be an apprentice helping out at home, but what you said is true.」

「I don't understand what that job entails in detail. Simply put, it's similar to the merchants peddling cooked food in the post station town, correct?」

「Yes, you are correct.」

「In that case—— can you sell me the dishes you prepared?」

「... What?」

I didn't understand what he meant.

Selling dishes—— How do I sell them in Forest's Edge?

「I'm not asking you to care take our hearth out of your good will, friendship or kinship, we will trade for your work with proper remunerations. Just for one night, we hope to purchase your cooking skills, knowledge and labor—— That is our wish.」

And I——

Was dumbstruck.

「Asuta, you are a member of another house, so we won't demand for your blessings. And we just met last night, so we can't force you to offer us your kindness and generosity. In that case, we can only pay for you to render help.」

「If that is so... But——」

「I plan to pay you with everything I have, your cookings is worthy of me doing so. I want to share the joy of eating I experience that night with Ema Min and my father Dan Lutim, with my family and kins. Asuta, I need your strength.」

When Kaslan Lutim said that, he took off the tusks and horns hanging on his thick neck with a crisp clinking sound.

On the necklace was several layers of horns and tusks, far greater than the number of Ai Fa's neck.

Ema Min took off her necklace with a calm smile.

On it was the three tusks and horns gifted to her by her family.

They offered these necklaces that represents the pride of hunters and the love of their parents before me.

「Not just the Lutim, the hundred odd kins of the Wu house will also attend this banquet. I know this isn't enough to pay for everyone's meal, but every participant will gift us with one blessing each. That will be two hundred for Ema Min and me. If that still isn't enough, I will hunt kiba until it is enough...」

「Wait! That's too much, I can't accept this!」

I felt an emotion close to terror, and yelled loudly:

「I-I'm just a immature half-baked chef, I can't take on such an important job... And I'm an outsider, and don't know the rules of Forest's Edge too well yet, if you leave such an important job to me...」

「You have already shown us your capabilities, we are not worried about that.」

「B-By capabilities, you mean yesterday's steaks? Like I said, it's a dish a family can finish on their own. I will tell you the menu right now——」

「According to what you described, in order to reproduce the taste, we have to start from hunting the kiba right?」

「I will teach you! I will teach you how to bloodleet and slaughter them! Actually, I have only slaughtered three kibas. You already possess the skill to skin them, so you will learn it in no time.」

「The hamburg steak that was brought up repeatedly last night——」

「It's fine even if you don't try it. It will be harmful to your bodies if you get addicted to that dish.」

「We are not that foolish.」

Kaslan Lutim—— suddenly smiled.

It was a strong smile, filled with the pride and dignity of a man.

「If that dish will harm the body of a hunter, I will not touch it at all. But you said that there wouldn't be any effects even if we eat it one thousand or two thousand times, isn't that right Asuta?」

「T-That's just my assumption, I don't know the actual facts. However, it is certain that eating soft food all day will definitely make one's teeth and jaws grow weak.」

「If someone allows their soul to corrode even after hearing your words, then they are the ones who are too weak. You don't need to feel gloomy about this. You are telling us this to warn us right?」

Kaslan Lutim gently placed a fist onto the floor and leaned forward.

The righteous youth didn't show any changes on his face, but his emotions might be getting heated up quietly:

「I'm a hunter, so I can't explain as clearly as you—— Anyway, I want to share my feelings with everyone. If there is more joy in life, we will have a stronger will to live. The happiness you brought to us gave Ema Min and me strength, and I want others to know this strength too. Not just house Lutim, I want to share it with the Wu house, Min house, Lei house, Mamu house, Lilin house and Mufa house—— In the face of such a situation, we need to obtain a greater strength to fulfill our obligations as hunters.」

The situation he was referring to—— was it about the Tsun clan becoming depraved?

But I couldn't think about so many things at the same time.

「T-That's why I told you... that I will impart all of my skills to you. Including bloodletting, slaughtering, grilling poitans and how to cook the steaks you ate yesterday. Give me six days, I will teach everyone the details. I have already taught some of the skills to the women of the Wu clan ——」

「... And the hamburg steak?」

「There's no need to go out of the way to learn that dish. Hamburg steak takes too much effort to prepare, and doesn't really fit the denizens of Forest's Edge right?」

「It might be rude for me to say this, but whether hamburg steak is suitable for the denizens of Forest's Edge should be decided by the denizens of Forest's Edge... No, you're already a member of the Fa house, and a part of Forest's Edge now. I'm not taking your words lightly, but I wish to choose my own path.」

「If we can get tremendous joy out of this, we will choose that path no matter how much extra efforts it will take.」

Ema Min finally chipped in.

「What should we do in order to live? Forage for firewood? Dry pico leaves? Tan hides? What are the things we should do and which path should we take? Eighty years ago, our forebears also considered these things, and impart them to us. One day, I will bear Kaslan's children—— And I hope I can guide them down a path that leads to greater happiness.」

「No one will neglect their other chores just for the sake of cooking. But if anyone is willing to put in the extra effort, that means there is value and meaning in doing so. If someone finds the value in hamburger steak, then she is definitely willing to spend the time make them. If not, then she wouldn't bother... that's how simple it is」

「But you have not tried hamburger steaks before, so why are you adamant about it?」

「We are not only after the hamburger steak, we are hoping that you can give it your all.」

Kaslan Lutim said.

「That's why we are asking you. I won't ask the people who learned from you, we just want to ask you. Just for one night, we hope you can do everything you can for us—— and this is the payment for our job request.」

「Please wait. I——」

But I didn't say anything more.

My mind was more confused than I thought, and I was wavering.

The next moment, Ai Fa who was quiet all this while said:

「Asuta seems to be tired, he's stamina is no different from a ten years old child after all. Just carrying the goods back from the post station town was enough to leave him exhausted... I'm sorry, but can we give our reply tomorrow?」

「I see, of course it's fine—— Well then Asuta, we have one last thing to ask of you.」

「... Pray tell.」

「Last night, you said that you want to be a medicine, not poison—— and I sincerely hope so too. Your strength must not become poison. If it becomes medicine, then the denizens of Forest's Edge might obtain more joy, bonds and strength to continue living. I rushed here because of this thought in my mind. May we pick the same path—— Alright then, we will take our leave.」

Part 3

The sun sets.

We met Kamyua Yost in the post station town at noon, and after returning to Forest's Edge, we had a long discussion with Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min. This had far exceeded my brain capacity, so I immersed myself in cooking as a brief respite from reality.

The menu for today was simple. Not counting the time to grill poitan in, it was finished in less than an hour.

Aria and tino leaves were boiled inside the iron pot.

On the fake rubber leaves were additional aria and tino leaves. The aria was cut into either round or semi-circle slices, while the tino leaves that had the texture of cabbages were cut into bite sizes.

Besides the vegetables were the kiba meat. There were belly meat, shoulder meat and thigh meat. I tried my best to cut the meat into 5mm slices, and arranged them into a beautiful circle.

A thick red liquid was glistening on the wooden plate, a condiment made with fruit wine as its base. After bringing the fruit wine to a boil and the alcohol evaporates, I added salt and pico leaves to flavor it slightly. It had a tangy sweetness to it which will definitely make Donda Wu complain if he eats it.

「Alright! Ai Fa, it's done!」

Ai Fa looked at me with an expression that says: 「What's this?」

That's right, this was just a plate with raw meat slices displayed on top, so a denizen of Forest's Edge wouldn't understand.

「This is Shabu shabu², a dish where you can cook and eat the meat yourself.」

Even after hearing my explanation, the question mark on top of Ai Fa didn't disappear.

Instead of explaining with words, it was simpler to show by hand. I took out the secret weapon I prepared for this day——

After slicing the krilee branches that has almost no taste into thin sticks, I dried them and made them into 「chopsticks³」.

「First, put the meat into the pot like this.」

「Uwah!」

I turned my head because of the strange noise, and found Ai Fa covering her mouth with her face red for unknown reasons.

「What? Something happened? I didn't do anything that will make you embarrassed.」

「S-Shut up! What kind of disgusting movement is that!」

「Hmm ~? That's how you use chopsticks.」

2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shabu-shabu>

3 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chopsticks>

I opened and close the chopsticks a couple of times, and Ai Fa continued her 「Uwah, uwah」. Her face was getting redder... She seemed embarrassed that she couldn't suppress her cries.

「I will carry on with the demonstration—— Put the meat into the soup like this, and slowly move it from side to side, until the slices aren't red any more. Shabu~ shabu~」

「... What sort of spell is that?」

「It's a spell to make the meat turn tastier.」

I then placed the well cooked belly meat onto Ai Fa's plate.

After that, I picked up a piece of aria and tino leave floating in the pot for her.

「The problem is that it will take some time to finish three arias. Ah, try it first. If you don't like it, I will change it into a normal meat soup.」

「.....」

After she finished mumbling to herself—— I already know what she was saying softly. After Ai Fa gave thanks to the grace of the forest and to me, she picked up the plate suspiciously.

She scooped up the meat and aria coated in the condiment, and ate it.

「Shabu~shabu~... how does it taste?」

「... it's tender.」

「Belly meat is tender right? Here, this is thigh meat.」

「... It's tougher than the meat in meat soup.」

「Shabu~shabu~」, I was getting tired of saying that. 「And finally, shoulder meat.」

「... It's soft.」

「Like I said, our intense match with Donda Wu is over, so we don't need to care about the toughness of the meat. If it don't fit your taste, I will cook some meat soup instead. What do you think?」

Ai Fa fell into deep thought with a troubled face.

In the meantime, I said 「shabu shabu~」 repeatedly and cooked some belly meat for myself.

「Don't be so troubled, just tell me what your honest thoughts are.」

Despite what I said, she still didn't reply, so I placed a slice of belly meat into my mouth.

Ah.

Delicious.

For the past ten odd days, our dinner was either steak or hamburg steak, so the texture and refreshing taste of the thin pieces of meat felt delicious.

I drank plenty of meat soup at the Wu clan, but food cooked from 「simmering」 and 「dipping」 still have some difference.

On top of that, dinner tonight was Shabu shabu. Aside from the aralia and tino leaves, only a bit of salt was added into the soup. The only condiment was the fruit wine sauce, so it couldn't conceal the taste of the meat.

There wasn't any need to conceal the taste of the kiba, I could feel the energy from these meat. The kiba was juicy and tasty, and the juice spew out every time I chewed, so I didn't know when I should swallow.

There was still a bit of a stench in the meat, and it was tougher than pork, but it would be fine if I slice it thinly like this. When I tried the thigh meat which was the toughest body part, I could actually chew and enjoy its wonderful texture.

「Wow, it's really good...! That's what I think, what about you?」

Ai Fa thought for a moment, then said: 「it is delicious.」

「But... I can only eat a little at a time, this is too slow.」

「Yes, I know how you feel. I will often feel it is troublesome towards the end, and throw it all into the pot. Especially pork—— No, kiba meat has to be completely cooked, until it loses its red color.」

「If that is so, why not cook it all from the start?」

「Hmm? Well ~ cooking it all from the start is one way of eating it. The advantage of cooking one piece at a time is that we can eat freshly cooked and steaming hot meat. To be honest, I don't eat this too often either.」

「I see.」

「That's right, and our restaurant don't have Shabu shabu either. We seldom eat out, when my mother...」

I couldn't help stopping, but I had to finish it since I already started the sentence.

「... When my mother is still alive, we will eat this occasionally.」

I told myself in the post station town that I shouldn't tell Ai Fa about my world in too much detail. Was that the right thing to do?

Ai Fa squint her eyes a little, and cast her gaze on the pot that was boiling.

I ruffled my head, and threw a small piece of wood into the stove.

「... How old were you when your mother passed away? 」

「Hmm? About seven, what's the matter? 」

「That early? 」 After she said that, Ai Fa lift her head and ask in surprise:

「Which means you tasted this dish before you are seven? 」

「Probably, yeah. It's too lonely to have hot pot with just me and my dad... Ah, no, I won't feel that way when I eat hotpot with you though. 」

「.....? 」

「Damn it, I'm digging my own grave...! It's nothing, simply put, this is a standard home cooked meal for an entire family... So when a family of three becomes two, it makes me feel that eating hot pot feels lonely! Sorry for saying something so depressing! 」

Ai Fa blinked her eyes, and didn't seem to understand what I was saying completely.

「I don't understand. Will it make you unhappy to eat this dish with me? 」

「I wouldn't have prepared this dish if I feel that way. 」

「I see. That's great... Looks like I don't need to beat you up. 」

「That's a relief! 」

「... Lend me that. 」

Ai Fa reached out her right hand.

「Hmm? The chopsticks? Don't you find them disgusting? 」

「Then why did you make another pair? 」

She found out.

I prepared another pair of chopsticks, and had placed it quietly in the shadows of the plate and ladle used to remove foam from the soup.

「I made another pair for you of course. But it's not easy to use though. 」

「If you can use it, so can I. 」

Ai Fa pouted again.

So as I kept an eye on the aria and tino leaves so they didn't overcook, and gave a simple lecture on how to use chopsticks.

「Hmmp, that's simple.」

Three minutes later, Ai Fa picked up a piece of aria successfully.

Hmm ~

Nevermind, it works if she can pick up food firmly —— I told myself.

In the end, Ai Fa didn't learn the right way to hold chopsticks. She held one stick with her thumb and index finger, and the other stick with her ring finger and pinkie. And she was better at it than me.

The positioning looks perfect though, so let's keep it at that.

「Okay, let's continue eating! Eat more aria okay? If there are leftovers, I can fry some meat with them.」

「Yes.」

After seeing Ai Fa, I added another firewood, then ate some grilled poitan.

「Asuta, what meat is this?」

「That's the meat from the shoulder and back.」

「I see.」

Ai Fa dipped the meat into the iron pot——

「Shabu~shabu~」, she started mumbling.

I couldn't help spitting the poitan I chew half way out, and choked on my food.

「What are you doing, don't waste food.」

Ai Fa said as she glared at me, then continued: 「Shabu~shabu~」.

I tried my best to stifle my laughter and decided to wait until I had thoroughly enjoyed her demeanor before telling her 「You can just say it in your heart if you think it is a hassle」 —— I promised to myself in my heart.

Part 4

The peaceful dinner ended smoothly.

We tidied up the cutlery as usual, put out one of the candles, and it was time to think over the troublesome matters properly.

「...Asuta, I will be blunt.」

Ai Fa lifted her hands to let down her blonde hair as she said quietly:

「What Kaslan Lutim said earlier was meant for you. As the house head, I will tell you my opinion. But you have to make the final decision yourself.」

「Yes, I know.」

「And also, you don't need to worry about the Fa house's position for this matter.」

「Huh?」

「This is a proper trade. Even if you fail, no one will be punished. If you succeed, the Wu clan and the Fa house won't get any closer. Aside from the remuneration, we won't be affected at all.」

Her hair swayed in the darkness.

Unwed women didn't cut their hair, so Ai Fa's hair was rather long.

「... But what will happen to the two of them? If I fail, how will that affect them?」

「Nothing much, they will just lose their kin's trust, and be mocked. Everyone will say that the heir of the Lutim house messed up the entire ceremony, and is a fool who tarnished the pride of a hunter for some retarded game.」

「Uwah. I'm glad that you don't hold back at all during times like this... Ah~! What should I do!」

「Be quiet... What are you so worried about? To me, this is a safe bet with nothing to worry about.」

Ai Fa leaned against the wall and tilted her head confusedly.

「Kaslan Lutim's request is for you to cook the dishes you made before, but create anything new. Kiba steak, hamburg steak, meat soup and grilled poitan... You just need to serve these dishes, and the guests will be surprised and awed.」

「That might be so... but they would add all sorts of vegetables into the pot lavishly during banquets right? Mama Mia Lei mentioned this yesterday. That's why I didn't hesitate in adding tino leaves and pula into the meat soup meant for the guest.」

Ai Fa flicked her hair again.

The candle was probably too dim, and I couldn't see her face as clearly as usual.

「And so, no matter how great the dish I served was, there will be people unhappy about the bland palate of ingredients, feel that something is amiss and get angry. Not just that, if my cooking isn't to their liking— Then it will mess up the banquet they were looking forward too, right?」

「.....」

「And this is a formal wedding ceremony. There might be old men with archaic thinking, or people more stubborn than Donda Wu who prefers the poitan pot stew usually served at banquets. Everyone have their own preference after all, and I keep forgetting something so obvious. That's why my pride as a chef was hurt when I heard Donda Wu disparaging me. I don't think everyone will accept my cooking unconditionally anymore..」

「Asuta, what exactly... are you afraid of?」

Ai Fa's voice was a little puzzled..

「Even though all that might happen, Kaslan Lutim still wish for you to care take their hearth. This is an important banquet for him, but he wants you to tend to the lives of his irreplaceable family and relatives. Isn't this a great honor?」

「It is a great honor. I'm so afraid because I'm not worthy of it. Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min believe me from the bottom of their heart and want to entrust me with such an important task. I could feel that—— and it makes me afraid.」

「... I still don't understand.」

Ai Fa shrugged in the darkness.

I stood up, walk to Ai Fa and sat down.

「... What's the matter?」

Ai Fa looked at me quizzically.

She was frowning, but her eyes were calmer than I imagined.

「Sorry, I feel uneasy if I can't see your face. If you feel uncomfortable that we are too close, I will light another candle.」

Ai Fa shook her head slowly and said:

「Asuta, you already finished the agreement you had with Donda Wu successfully, so why are you still so worried? This is the first time you act so timid about your own cooking.」

「... What happened back then was because of my ideals and emotions. I want to give Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba more strength, and to be acknowledged by Donda Wu. I only took on these seemingly impossible matches because of this strong feelings—— But it's different this time.」

I looked into Ai Fa's beautiful blue eyes and said:

「I don't have any bonds with Kaslan Lutim, and I don't know if what he said is true. Even though it has nothing to do with me, I can't decide if it is right. Because I——」

「You want to say that you are not from this world?」

There was a gleam of displeasure in Ai Fa's eyes.

「... Asuta, your eyes are gloomy today. When we met Donda Wu, you found the right path forward. But now, you can't see anything.」

「W-What do you mean?」

「Don't you get it? You don't need to worry about favors or blood relations, there's no right or wrong about this either, and the decision isn't made by you. Kaslan Lutim already told you right? They just want to borrow your strength.」

Ai Fa suddenly grabbed my arm.

Her face was already close to mine, and she was right at my nose now.

The aftertaste of dinner was overwhelmed —— by Ai Fa's fragrance.

「Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min will decide your value, not you. You don't need to worry about favors, blood relations, goodwill and generosity. They acknowledged your capabilities, and wish to 『purchase』 your strength for one night with money.」

「That's because...」

「It doesn't matter if the results meet your expectation, that's the responsibility of the buyer, the seller don't need to worry about that. Asuta, you——」

Ai Fa seemed to be in deep thought, and then said:

「.....Asuta, you bought some food in the post station town today right?」

「Yes. It wasn't delicious, but it's not horrible either.」

「Why did you spend copper plates to buy them?」

「Hmm? That's because... It smells great and looked fine.」

「Do you think the taste was worth it?」

「No, it's the price of a bottle of fruit wine, that's too expensive for me.」

「In that case, are you going to complain to the shop and ask them to refund you?」

I——

My vision turned clear.

「You found value in that food and paid the price. Kaslan Lutim also found the value in your cooking and wants to pay you for it. The customers are free to think whatever they want after buying the product. But even if they are unhappy, they won't grumble about that.」

「Ai Fa...」

「Furthermore, Kaslan Lutim and the others already tried your cooking. They are after the taste of your dishes, and are willing to pay the price. You also make a living by cooking and selling food back in your hometown, so why are you turning them down...? This is what confuses me.」

「I get it—— I get it now, Ai Fa. I finally understand what I'm so afraid of.」

Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min were just normal 「patrons」.

I had no links or bonds with them. Even if I turn them down, they had no grounds for complains. Even if they find faults with my dishes, I wouldn't need to take any responsibilities.

That was why—— I was so afraid.

Seeing a 「price」 set for my cooking, and sold as 「merchandise」—— This filled me with fear.

「I... never had a shop of my own before. The shop owner was my father, and I'm just helping him.」

To make the thoughts in my mind clearer, I tried articulating them.

Ai Fa listened to me quietly.

「Back then, the customers are paying for my father's dishes. Even if I cooked the rice, roast the meat and cut the vegetables—— the dishes were still my father's cooking, not mine. That's what I always thought.」

「Yes.」

「And after coming to this world, I met you and started preparing the dishes for you and myself. I then met Rimee Wu, Grandma Jiba and Donda Wu. I then cooked for many people—— but that wasn't selling my cooking. I only cooked for them because I wanted them to try it.」

「Yes.」

「Hence, I didn't prepare the dishes for Donda Wu personally last night. Because they didn't need me as a chef. Hence, I think that only the home cooking prepared by his family can satisfy the heart of that old man.」

「Yes.」

「And this time—— it is the opposite from the last time, they needed me as a chef.」

A chill ran down my spine.

It was cooler at night than in the day, but we could still manage with our thin clothings—— and my knees started quivering badly.

「That's the thing—— that frightens me.」

「.....」

「This is different from the blessings given to me by the Wu family members. I'm just a half baked chef, and isn't sure if my cookings has any value. The thought of people unrelated to me judging my cooking calmly—— makes me very uneasy.」

「Even if you say that——」, Ai Fa who pulled her face away leaned in again.

「Lights is coming back to your murky eyes.」

「Yes... This is the first time anyone has placed their faith in me as a chef. It scared me—— but it also filled me with pride.」

「Then, will you accept their job request?」

「... I want to take the job.」 I squeezed out these words.

My stomach was constricting, and the meat and poitan I ate looked as if they were going to be pushed out.

「Since they trust me that much... I want to work hard to properly earn the remunerations they are offering. As a chef, I hope my skills won't bring me shame.」

My whole body was shaking.

I was really going to puke.

I was shocked, I never thought I was so cowardly.

The next instant —— Ai Fa brush her palm over my cheeks. Her eyes looked into mine from an extremely close distance.

「... I'm very proud.」 Ai Fa said quietly.

Under Ai Fa's gaze—— My trembling finally stopped.

Chapter 3 - Preparation Work of the Half Baked Chef

Part 1

The next morning Ema Min visited the Fa house alone.

We were cleaning the cutlery, maintaining our blades and checking our food stock.

The timing of her visit reminded me of Rimee Wu's visit last time.

「I can accept your proposal after confirming some details.」

We sat in the same position as last night, facing the guest together with the house head.

Ema Min asked calmly:

「Confirmed? What would you like to confirm?」

「There are too many matters that are too vague. I want to check the details, as well as the quality and quantity of the dishes. Cooking for a hundred guest is a huge undertaking.」

Ai Fa and I sat side by side and faced Ema Min. I told her the contents of what I thought last night.

「First, you just want me to serve the dishes I cooked the previous time. However, I don't know how many people will be satisfied after tasting it, which leaves me worried. There are only five days before the banquet. There isn't much time, but I want everything to be done as perfectly as possible.」

「Alright.」

「And so, since you are willing to buy my culinary skills, I hope you can buy not just that night, but these five days too.」

「That's fine... What should we do specifically?」

「Specifically, I hope you can provide the ingredients and a place for me to research my cooking. I need many stoves, prepared ingredients and firewood. Finally, people to taste test it for me... And of course, I can't be the only one cooking on that day right?」

「Yes, going by past precedence, there will be more than ten women cooking that night.」

「That's wonderful. In that case, I hope the women who will be tending to the hearth that day will help to taste the food. On top of that, I hope they can help me research the dishes without getting in their work, and learn the cooking techniques.」

「Alright, I can arrange for that, I think it's necessary too.」

「Thank you. Next is the kiba meat, I need enough of them for these five days, and for the banquet. I can't slaughter all the kiba by myself, so I hope the men from the Lutim house can assist me—— If you want to taste delicious meat in house Lutim in the future, then everyone has to learn this technique.」

「Yes, we want to ask you to do that too.」

「Well then, will you agree to my terms? Aside from the ingredients for these five days and the banquet, I also want adequate remunerations.」

「Of course. We are after your skills and knowledge, so we will naturally prepare the ingredients you need.」

She began each sentence by agreeing with me, showing this woman's honest nature.

Ema Min then straightened her back, looked right at me and said:

「Asuta of House Fa, what is the price you are willing to accept in exchange for lending us your aid?」

「Yes. I—— hope to make this deal with you for the tusks and horns of twenty kiba beasts.」

The next moment, Ema Min's cheerful face turned gloomy.

「Twenty kiba beasts... which is eighty kiba tusks and horns right? We can't set a price on your ability... But the price is too cheap. Like we said yesterday, all of our kin will gift us a blessing each, and after gathering all that——」

「I can't accept two hundred tusks and horns, I'm still a half baked chef.」

I scratched my head and added on:

「To be honest, I'm troubled too. I don't think I can find anyone who knows what is a fair price for this job.」

「That's true. There's probably no one in Forest's Edge who will ask someone who isn't their kin to tend to the hearth for their wedding.」

Ema Min smiled gently.

Not only was she a bright and cheerful girl, she also had a flexible tenacity about her. I felt this way about her once again.

「To be honest, I have something I wanted to buy at the post station town. I heard it cost 20 kiba tusks and horns, that's why I decided on this price... But I feel that this is adequate payment, so I definitely won't cut corners.」

I looked right into Ema Min's eyes.

「I promise to do everything I can to prepare for this banquet for this remuneration. Are you willing to buy my culinary skills at this price?」

「We requested for your help because of this personality of yours.」

Ema Min smiled leisurely.

Her smile was filled with motherly love, making it hard to believe that she was the same age as me, Ai Fa and Leina Wu.

「Well then, we will use the tusks and horns of twenty kiba beasts to exchange for your capabilities——」

「Ah, hold on! I have one more thing to ascertain.」

I spoke while glancing at the side profile of Ai Fa sitting besides me.

She was sitting cross legged with one knee up, her expression filled with dignity.

「I'm the hearth caretaker of the Fa house, I don't want to neglect my work in the Fa house either. That's why... For the next five days, I wish to bring Ai Fa along with me to the house that will be hosting me for taste testing and dinner. I won't ask house Lutim to prepare a bed for us, but can you reserve a seat for me and the head of my house?」

「I see, that's part of our obligation too... Hmm...」

When Ema Min said that, she tilted her head slightly with her index finger on her cheek, and fell into deep thought.

Ah, so this kind of gap moe exist too—— Such a strange thought welled up in my mind, but my face was still serious.

「I think... that shouldn't be a problem. After all, house Lutim is close with the Wu clan...」

「What? What has this got to do with the Wu clan?」

「The wedding will be held in the Wu clan's village.」

Oh no.

「And the women of the Wu clan will be tending to the hearth that day.」

Oh no oh no oh no.

「Members from house Lutim and house Min had to prepare other things, so they couldn't tend the hearth. You will be starting your research later today right? I'm planning to head to the Wu main house to discuss the details of borrowing the stove room and ask the women of the Wu clan for help.」

Oh shit.

「B-But, isn't the Wu clan your 『Elder family』? Can you ask them to take care of such trivial matters?」

「We are doing this because they are our elder family. Taking care of the juniors is the job of the seniors.」

She was absolutely right.

But I would prefer working in a place without too much worries.

「Therefore, if your family wish to dine together at the Wu clan, you have to get permission from the Wu clan head Donda Wu. With how close the Wu clan and Fa house is, this will definitely be fine.」

No, there might be good relationships, but there were bad ones too.

Speaking of which, I said not too long ago to the Wu clan that 「home cooking should be left to one's family」, so this development would be too ironic.

「Is that so? So you will spend this time cooking delicious meals? That's a wonderful opportunity for the Wu clan. I'm so envious of the Wu clan women. Many of their kin will want to learn from the Wu clan in the future.」

I see, for the sake of Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu, this might be a more adequate arrangement. Leina Wu learned fast, Grandma Ditto Min and Mama Mia Lei were just as skilled too. The three of them would definitely master the cooking techniques in five days.

Besides, I could use this chance to impart the bloodletting and slaughtering techniques to the Wu clan.

In a sense, wasn't this the development I wanted the most?

But what should I do about Donda Wu, Jiza Wu and Darum Wu?

Dining for five nights with these dangerous people—— Just the thought of it filled me with worries.

In contrast, the shabu shabu last night was so relaxing!

... But this is also part of the job.

Considering the efficiency, since the women from the Wu clan will be tending to the hearth for the wedding, I should instruct them directly. It would be quite stupid to stop my research at dusk and return to the Fa house. I should keep private matters and business apart during times like this, and tackle the Wu clan's dinner boldly.

Furthermore, aside from cooking the food for taste testing, the women also needed to prepare dinner—— Since I was considering about working in some other place, that meant I wanted to avoid the Wu clan.

Hmm speaking of which... I'm rethinking the menu in order to let more people enjoy my cooking. Hence, inflexible people like Donda Wu would be most suited for the role of taste tester. The same applies to Jiza Wu whose thinking is old fashioned, and Darum Wu who has a bad impression of me —— I have to do my best to make them acknowledge my cooking.

「Asuta... Are you alright?」

Ema Min leaned forward worriedly.

「I'm fine. We still needed permission from the Wu clan, but do you agree to the terms I mentioned—— and buy my culinary skills? The price is the tusks and horns of twenty kiba.」

「Yes. Asuta of Fa house, please give us your full support.」

Ema Min smiled gently——

It was a deal.

Part 2

And so, I started my work.

The first is a lecture on bloodletting.

I need to explain the process of bloodletting to the men of the Wu clan and Lutim house.

The men will head into the woods at noon, and I have to take care of this task before studying for a new dish.

「You took on a difficult task, suffering a little in the beginning will make the latter part easier!」
—— That seemed to be the arrangement made by god.

When my soul gets summoned back to heaven, I will beat that god up.

Even though Kaslan Lutim bequested this job to me, I had to explain to his family and be wary of the men from the Wu clan who opposed this work.

This job was really bad on the stomach.

「Yo Asuta, everyone's here.」

Out of this entire group, Ludo Wu was the only oasis for my spirit. He told me this fact causally.

Standing before me—— were twenty odd ferocious hunters of Forest's Edge, including seventeen men from the Wu clan I saw a few days earlier.

They stood at the plaza in the Wu village, and emitted an air of feral beasts. Their age varied widely, but all of them were hunters with well built bodies.

They were about to head into the forest, so all of them had a sharp killing intent about them.

「... First, let me greet everyone here.」

Kaslan Lutim walked to my side.

「I'm the eldest son of the Lutim main house, Kaslan Lutim. Everyone probably knows that I'm requesting for everyone's help to prepare for the wedding between Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min five days later. Thank you, head of the Wu clan, Donda Wu and my fellow kinsmen for heeding my request. I wish to thank you all once again.」

Donda Wu, standing to the right of the group, remained with his arms crossed and without any reaction.

He actually agreed to this proposition.

Maybe his high position meant he couldn't turn down the request of his junior?

「I have requested Asuta from house Fa to care take the hearth during the wedding. As Asuta had no previous dealings with house Lutim, so I will buy his capabilities with copper plates for one night. And why did I do something that goes against the custom of Forest's Edge? I can't explain this very well, so I won't say too much. However, know that I made this decision as the eldest son of house Lutim.」

The men weren't stirred by this.

Did they hold any grudge? Or any other emotions—— They were like beasts waiting to be unleashed, their eyes glimmering quietly.

Donda Wu's brothers and their sons were here.

And the brothers of Donda Wu's parents—— his uncle and their family were here too.

The thought of this filled me with fear. But looking at this from another perspective, everyone here were tied to Grandma Jiba by blood, and a relative of Rimee Wu.

「As for the preparation work for the banquet—— Asuta will be using the techniques he learned in his hometown to process the kiba meat used for the banquet in a special way. We need to perform this task before the kiba is completely dead. Asuta will now explain the details.」

It was finally my turn.

I nodded and walk to the front.

「I'm Asuta from house Fa, thank you everyone for your help—— I will get right into it. I would like everyone to help with 『Bloodletting』. That is to catch a kiba and before dealing the fatal blow, drain all of its blood. The place to cut is between the chest and head, closer to the chest side. Above the kiba's heart is an artery, we have to cut it with a knife. Once the artery is cut, a lot of blood will spray out, so you can tell if you did it successfully. Please take care not to hurt the kiba's heart or air pipe, that will kill it.」

Silence.

No reaction.

「Well... The important thing is to 『not let it die』. Even if you break its skull or deal a mortal wound, it can still survive for some time. If its artery near its heart is cut while its heart is still beating, 『bloodletting』 can be done swiftly.」

「I have a question.」

Ludo Wu raised his hand.

I felt my soul being healed and answered:

「What's your question?」

「So I can't cut the kiba's neck? I always kill them this way, and it will make them bleed a lot.」

「If you do that, it might die before it completely bleeds out. If you are lucky and cut its artery without hurting its respiratory system, then it will be fine. If not, there might be blood residue in the veins of the meat.」

「... What are you saying, I don't understand! So I can't cut their throats? Hmmp~ the throat is no good, the heart is no good either. It's difficult to capture a kiba when we encounter one.」

「That's right, so don't push yourself. Just capturing a few kiba will be enough to feed all the banquet guest. And it is foolish to risk one's life just for the processed meat.」

「Asuta, only you will risk your life for something like that... By the way, why are you using such a respectful tone when you talk to me? It's uncomfortable, don't make me kick you.」

「Please don't kick me... The next steps will be done after carrying the kiba home and skinning it. I will explain further during that time. That's all I have to say for now.」

Aside from Ludo Wu, the other men didn't say a word. More than half of them turned and left quietly.

They didn't bid farewell, or shout together like they did five days ago. With Donda Wu and Jiza Wu leading them, the seventeen Wu clan men left the plaza quietly.

「I will make a move first. Asuta, I will be looking forward to a delicious meal on my return.」

Finally, Ludo Wu turned his head back towards me, a feral-like fire was burning in his eyes too.

This youth was petite and had an adorable appearance, but he could put on a hunter's face instantly. I felt a chill every time I saw this, and also felt attracted to it for some reasons at the same time.

「Thank you, your explanation is easy to understand.」

Kaslan Lutim said with a smile.

Only five men remained, all of them were men from house Lutim. As the Lutim village was some distance away, they formed an elite task group to learn the steps to process meat from me directly.

「It is not my place to worry about this, but don't the Wu clan members oppose this? Will this deteriorate the relationship between the Lutim house and the Wu clan?」

「Deteriorate? I don't understand what you are saying. I asked the Wu clan for a favor as a member of the Lutim house, and since the clan head Donda Wu agreed to this, the men will obey his orders, there won't be any problems.」

「I see. But there is no way for us to know how each individual feels right?」

「The feelings of individuals are not related to the will of the clan. The members will follow the decision of the clan head, and do their jobs. Hence, the Wu clan members will do their best. The Wu clan is powerful, so I'm not worried at all.」

「That's true...」

「That aside, Asuta, I have something to discuss with you.」

Kaslan Lutim's face was honest, and an even more sincere expression appeared on his face now.

「I asked Ludo Wu about the relationship between the Fa house and Wu clan. In order to save Jiba Wu who was losing her appetite, the Wu clan asked you to make a trip to their home. And you successfully saved Jiba Wu's soul... Is that true?」

「Yes, she was pleased with my cooking.」

「I see. Jiba Wu was more energetic than I heard during the pre-wedding celebration! Asuta, thank you very much. I am grateful for what you have done.」

「Huh? Why?」

「Don't you know? Jiba Wu's daughter married into the Lutim house, so house Lutim and the Wu clan became relatives. Out of the six kin house, we have the longest relationship with the Wu clan.」

I see.

Which means—— As the heir to the Lutim main house, Kaslan Lutim was Grandma Jiba's great grandson

「Yes. Jiba Wu's daughter's son is my father Dan Lutim. Jiba Wu's blood flows as thickly in my veins as Jiba Wu and Ludo Wu.」

「I see...」

I should separate my personal matters from my professional conduct.

However —— Grandma Jiba's blood flowed in the youth before me, so wishing him well for his wedding shouldn't be going too far.

「Asuta, you once said that we don't owe each other anything, but it seems that I'm in your debt. I'm very happy to have met you this way.」

Kaslan Lutim said as he reached for the inner pockets of his cape.

He took out a string of tusks and horns more plentiful than yesterday, held it to my nose and said:

「Asuta, please take this. It's half the promised remuneration, the tusks and horns of ten kiba. I will give you the remaining half after the banquet.」

「It's fine, you can give them to me after the job is done. Maybe I will—— well, die in a freak fire while cooking and not complete my work.」

I don't know when I will return to my original world—— I couldn't tell him that, so I made a joke instead. But Kaslan Lutim's face remained serious.

「In that case, it's the same for me too, I don't know when I might succumb to the forest. And so, I'm giving the remuneration to you now as a sign of my trust in you. Please accept this.」

I regretted joking about it so lightly.

I couldn't tell him the truth because of my personal issues. But I shouldn't trample over this serious youth's sincere attitude just to cover up that truth.

「I understand, I will accept this—— and work hard to repay your trust.」

Kaslan Lutim smiled gently and passed me the necklace.

There might be 40 tusks and horns from ten kiba, it didn't weigh that much—— However, I could feel a weight surpassing it when I accepted that necklace.

Part 3

When the sun was at its peak, I saw off the men heading into the forest, bid farewell to Kaslan Lutim, and finally started researching my cooking.

I went around to the back of the Wu house and headed for the stove room. Two women were already waiting for me there.

They were the wife of the eldest son Jiza Wu, and the third daughter Lala Wu.

「Asuta, we were waiting for you. The two of us will assist you today.」

The young wife Sati Lei Wu had short brown hair and black eyes. She was slender and had a pure face. She smiled at me maturely.

「Uwah, where did you get so many tusks and horns...? Who did you steal them from?」

Lala Wu, who was twelve, tied her ponytail at the top of her head. She was sarcastic towards me as usual.

「This is the down payment for my job this time. Erm, where should I put this?」

「If you don't mind, I will help you keep it in the house. It will be terrible if it falls into the stove.」

Sati Lei Wu took the necklace from my hands and walked out of the stove room.

She was thoughtful, but if she did that, I would have to be alone with this unfriendly girl.

As I expected, Lala Wu started speaking sarcastically:

「Hmmp! I thought the heir of house Lutim would be more dependable than the house head, but he asked you to care take the hearth for this important wedding. Is he mad!? House Lutim will become the laughing stock of Forest's Edge now. It's troubling for the Wu clan who is their elder house too!」

「I see, then I have to do my best so they will laugh softer.」

I knew it was useless to be angry to the nasty words of a girl five years younger than me, so I could only joke about it.

Furthermore, I felt a little guilt towards the four Wu sisters, so I couldn't do anything even if she hated me... It looked like I have to bear this cross for the rest of my life.

「No matter what, I will be in your care today... Don't you need to take care of other jobs? I'm the one who asked for your help, but I didn't expect the Wu clan to send two helpers right away.」

「I don't have a choice! Mama Mia Lei decided this. I don't want to see your face at all!」

Lala Wu suddenly showed a sinister face, frowned and took large strides my way.

「... Your tusks and horns.」

「Hmm?」

「Turned from eight to nine. Did Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min gift you with their blessings?」

「Well... I don't know if I can say it... Erm, never mind that.」

「What! If you don't tell me, I will tell Papa Donda what happened that morning!」

「T-That will be troubling for me... Your Papa Donda gifted this to me.」

Lala Wu boyish face burned with intense anger.

「That's impossible! Do you know how much Papa Donda hates you? He will never gift you any blessings! If you lie about this, I will really make that day's incident public!」

「I-I'm telling the truth. He didn't ask me to keep it a secret either, so I will just say it honestly. After that pre-wedding banquet, Donda Wu gifted me this blessing.」

When she heard me say that, Lala Wu was still furious. But a short while later, her anger turned into surprise.

「... You are telling the truth? If you lie to me, I will confirm this with Papa Donda you know? If you lied, I will tell him what happened that day!」

「Ahh, then I can only pray that Donda Wu will tell the truth. I can only hope he isn't someone who will lie for the the sake of his pride.」

「Could you be... telling the truth?」

「Yes.」

After I nodded, Lala Wu exploded again:

「I can't even! This is unbelievable! I intentionally didn't gift you any blessings because I was worried about Papa Donda's feelings! Why did he bless you! That makes me look so stupid! Damn it! What is he doing!」

「Erm, please calm down... Papa must have done it through tough and thorough thought.」

「Don't you call him Papa too! That's disgusting!」

「Sorry... But gifting a blessing is decided by the individual. Even if Donda Wu gift me a blessing, you don't need to mimick him too.」

「What do you mean!? You don't want my blessing?」

My words infuriated this girl.

I was probably fated not to get along with her. After sighing, the girl suddenly shoved her hand towards my nose——

On her palm was a tusk or a horn.

「... The dinner you cooked last night was delicious. And you also saved Grandma Jiba's life. So Lala Wu wish to bless Asuta from the Fa house.」

She looked really angry when she gifted me her blessing.

But I still took her white blessing with gratitude and said:

「Thank you, I'm really glad.」

「Hmmp!」

Lala Wu hmmped loudly and turned her face away.

She must really hate me. For someone like that to acknowledge my existence, felt just as exhilarating as someone who likes me gifting me their blessing —— I could feel this fact.

And so, I received ten blessings from the Wu clan.

Aside from the toddler Kota, only Jiza Wu and Darum Wu didn't gift me.

I probably will not receive blessings from them for my entire life... As I fell into deep thought, Sati Lei Wu returned to the stove room.

「Sorry for the wait... Ara, you haven't started yet?」

「Yes, we are going to start now. Can I take a look at the vegetables in your food store?」

「I understand... By the way, where did Ai Fa go? You two came over together right?」

「Yes. I still don't remember the exact position of the Wu clan, so I asked Ai Fa to bring me here. She should be chasing kiba in the woods right now.」

「I can't neglect hunting kiba during these five days.」

Ai Fa went home after saying that. There was still lots of kiba meat at home, and plenty of tusks and horns too. But even so, hunters still needed to do their best to hunt kiba.

If the hunters of Forest's Edge don't do their job properly, the excess number of kiba will spill out of the forest and attack the farmland of the western kingdom. The duty of the denizens of Forest's Edge is to stop them—— That seemed to be the consensus of everyone in Forest's Edge, but the chief clan seemed to have forgotten that goal.

Kamyua Yost... I have to meet that man who likes pretending to be stupid, and listen to what he has to say.

I plan to spend these five days in the Wu clan village up until the wedding day and research my cooking. Aside from hunting, Ai Fa also need to handle the Fa house chores such as managing the food store and collecting pico leaves. Hence, we will spend the night in an empty house at the Wu clan after dinner, and will then work separately from morning until evening.

Even Diga Tsun who got thrown into the river by Ai Fa didn't come to seek vengeance against Ai Fa, which shows that the Tsun clan couldn't act too nastily. But whenever I recall Doddo Tsun's stray dog-like eyes—— I would still feel worried.

But even when I stayed in the Fa house, Ai Fa still needed to head into the forest to hunt, so we still ended up acting separately. So this wasn't too different from our norm.

But I still didn't think we should maintain this status quo.

「——Asuta, what's wrong?」

I quickly snapped back to reality when I heard Sati Lei Wu called out to me.

「Nothing, let's head for the food store.」

No matter what, I'm still working at the moment.

The remuneration I get from this job will naturally become the commonwealth of the Fa house. For Ai Fa's sake, I have to make this work.

I entered the food store with the two ladies.

I couldn't find any vegetables I knew displayed on the shelf.

I visited the post station town yesterday, so I was starting to become familiar with these vegetables.

Well then—— which vegetables will get along with us?

「I want to share my idea with you two.」

After inspecting each vegetable, I said to the women standing behind me:

「I want to subdue the poitan.」

「You're saying... poitan?」

「Yes. I want to find a way to make poitan stew delicious. I think I need to start my research from here.」

「But why? Grilled poitan is tasty. I can eat several grilled poitan by itself without any other vegetables or meat.」

Ara, it seems that Sati Lei Wu was rather infatuated with grilled poitan.

I understand how she felt, but I still think this research was important.

「There would be many elderly people attending this banquet. If we served food that looked too strange, I'm afraid the guest will not be willing to accept them. I will still include grilled poitan in the menu, but I want to cook it in a way that both the young and the old can enjoy.」

「I see...」

Sati Lei Wu gave a short reply.

Her voice didn't sound too surprised, so I will proceed with this plan.

「I think the end goal is to find ingredients to complement the poitan. Do you two have any recommendations? Or any ingredients you hate?」

「Pula.」

Came a crude voice.

And of course, it was Lala Wu.

「Hmm... Now that you mentioned it, I remember that you and Ludo Wu don't like pula. Do you hate bitter food?」

「Shut up! I already answered you, why must I get nagged by you!?」

「Sorry sorry. Please tell me the food you hate.」

「... I don't like Lilo, Tarapa and Zozo.」

「Okay. Lilo is a herb used in smoking meat, what is tarapa and zozo?」

「Tarapa is that giant red fruit, zozo is the brown lump beneath the tarapa.」

I looked in the direction Sati Lei Wu was pointing in, and saw that tarapa was a vegetable the size of a pumpkin with a rough surface. Zozo was like a coiled up snake, and seemed to be a fruit like a beehive.

I could remember them easily because of their prominent appearance.

「I see. Sati Lei Wu, what are your views on the tarapa and zozo?」

「Well... tarapa is rather sour, while the zozo has a strong aroma. I'm fine with these ingredients —— I think putting the tarapa into a soup without poitan will be tastier.」

「I see.」

「Tarapa is very sour, if you add it into soup without any poitan, it is smooth and easy to swallow. As for zozo—— It doesn't matter if there is any poitan, if the meat has no stench, it will overwhelm the other ingredients and make the food nasty to eat.」

「Amazing! Your comments are very specific!」

「Because you showed me what is a 『delicious meal』. Before this, I didn't even care what the difference between the taste of tarapa and zozo was.」

Sati Lei Wu smiled gently.

Lala Wu besides her had a raving mad face as she shouted:

「I can't even! You don't need me at all! You can just work happily with Sati Lei then!」

「Lala, even if you can't describe your thoughts clearly, you don't need to be anxious.」

Sati Lei Wu placed her hand gently on the little girl's shoulder.

「You might be very sensible and observant, but you can't express yourself easily. I might be able to say what is on my mind clearly, but my emotions doesn't change as much. If we work together, we will definitely help Asuta more than we can alone.」

Out of all the Wu clan members, my relations with Sati Lei Wu was the faintest—— but I could tell she was a kind and mature girl from what she just said.

As expected of Jiza Wu's spouse! I felt a chill when I thought this far. What kind of person would Jiza Wu and Sati Lei Wu's child be nurtured into?

「Hmm? By the way, is Kota Wu a boy or a girl?」

They looked surprised that I asked that.

「It's obvious from the name right? Kota is a boy.」

I see, he do have the air of a boy.

「Yes, he might be small, but he is a boy. We were childless for some time, so I'm glad that my firstborn is a son.」

Sati Lei Wu replied with pride and joy on her face.

And one day, Kota Wu will become the clan head, following the footsteps of Donda Wu and Jiza Wu.

How should I put this —— even after realizing this, my heart was filled with lament.

「... Ah, zozo has a really strong aroma. Instead of being an ingredient, it's closer to being a spice. If it's added into the soup, it will definitely wipe away the taste of the other ingredients.」

I pulled myself back into reality.

「Yes. If we can eat kiba without any stench in the future, it won't be needed anymore. Lilo and zozo are mainly used to remove the stench.」

「I see, I will strike these two ingredients off the list for now. What about tarapa? There's an ingredient called tomato in my home country that has the same color, and it has a variety of ways to cook it.」

「Is that so. Tarapa smells nice, but I hate its sourness. I think it will taste better when added into a soup without any poitan.」

「Ah, that's true...」

A soup with poitan in it was like flour water. I imagined adding tomatoes into the flour water to neutralize the taste, and felt the strength sap away from me.

There might be a myriad of ways to cook with it, but it couldn't be of use this time.

「Then I will scratch off the tarapa. On the flip side, do you have any vegetables to recommend?」

「Hmm ~」

They both moaned after hearing that.

「If it's a soup without poitan, I can think of a few good ingredients. But if it is a stew with poitan...」

「That's right. If we think it's good, we would have added it into the soup in the past. In the end, no matter what you add in——」

Lala Wu turned silent at this point.

「What's the matter?」

Sati Lei Wu asked gently.

「Nothing... It won't change the soup's taste... but I do have a vegetable I like.」

「Ara, what is it?」

「No, pretend I never said that! I don't even know why I like it! The soup's taste won't change even after adding it!」

「I'm curious what vegetable you are talking about. Can you tell me what it is?」

Maybe I sound too anxious, Lala Wu's face looked a little uneasy, unlike her usual rowdy self.

Her slender finger pointed to the innermost part of the food store timidly.

Huh, that? I was speechless.

This ingredient was placed quietly in a corner of the dim food store, waiting for its moment to shine—— It had an impressionable appearance, and could rival that of zozo and tarapa, burning a strong presence in my heart. It was the giant two metre tall burdock, called 「Gigo」.

Part 4

A few hours later. When the sun was starting to move past its midpoint—— I could feel an out of place chaotic air closing in to the stove room fast.

When I was still troubled about that, a short figure charged in through the door that was open to facilitate air flow.

「Yo! Hearth caretaker, how's it going?」

「Uwah, that scared me...! L-Ludo Wu, what happened to you?」

Before me was Ludo Wu who went into the woods earlier.

However, the men out for a hunt would usually return around evening, and right now, Ludo Wu was—— covered in fresh blood.

His blonde hair, kiba cape, round face and limbs were covered in blood.

The youth smiled, his fiery eyes of a hunter were still burning.

「This is the blood from a kiba and someone else, there's no way I will get injured! Hearth caretaker, don't worry about that.」

「Someone else... Who?」

「It's the branch family's Ryada Wu... He's done for, the kiba's horn stabbed right into his leg. Even if he lives, he can't enter the forest anymore.」

My face probably turned very pale.

When he saw my face, Ludo Wu showed his feral smile again.

「Didn't I tell you not to worry? This has nothing to do with the work you requested us to do! The kiba usually won't herd together, but we were attacked by three of them at the same time today. Ryada Wu bore the brunt of their attack. My bow also broke and I almost died. I had no choice but to slit its throat. The kiba died immediately, so we couldn't bloodleech it.」

「I see...」 That was all I could say.

On a closer look, Sati Lei Wu and Lala Wu who were waiting for the water to boil looked at their family member with a peaceful face.

They were glad that Ludo Wu returned safely, but were also mourning the misfortune that befell their kin— Their quiet aura made me realized that the denizens of Forest's Edge made a different kind of resolve from myself, and I could feel how strong they were.

Ludo Wu wiped away the blood on his cheek, and clicked his tongue disinterestedly.

「Hmmp! We gained many tusks and horns thanks to them. In order to bring the kiba and Ryada Wu back, five men had to return early... It might be the peak season for kiba, but there's too many of them! Asuta, the Fa house is further to the north right? How is the forest there?」

He finally called me Asuta, and not hearth caretaker.

He was probably in an excited state earlier? The hunter with feral eyes had slowly turned back into an arrogant youth.

「W-Well, I don't know about the forest. But I could feel that more kiba had been caught. Erm... In this ten or so days, we hunted four kiba.」

「Huh?」

「Hmm?」

「The Fa house don't have other family members or kin right? Asuta, are you joking? How could you hunt four kiba in ten days?」

「Huh ~? Did I remember it wrong? We came back from the Wu clan and erected a stove the next day—— So it should be about twelve to thirteen days, and we hunted four kiba.」

「That's the same!」

He finally retorted fiercely.

After erecting the stove, Ai Fa hunted her third kiba, and caught another one a few days later, I definitely didn't miscount it.

「Asuta, is it true? One person can't surround and hunt kiba, and can only wait for kiba to fall into traps, or run into kiba in excited states like today. Or else, there is no way she could hunt four kiba in ten days.」

「No, not ten days, but twelve or thirteen...」

「I told you it's the same...! Did she use the 『sacrificial hunting style』?」

When I hear this youth spoke so seriously for the first time, and I feel that my heart was beating irregularly.

「L-Ludo Wu, what is the 『sacrificial hunting style』? Is it a taboo in Forest's Edge?」

「No, it's an ancient way of hunting that nobody uses anymore. If you are curious, you can ask your house head directly.」

I got it, I would do that.

At this moment, Sati Lei Wu said with a calm voice: 「Ludo Wu.」

Ludo Wu turned and looked outside with one eyebrow raised.

「Huh, you are already back? How is Ryada Wu?」

Before I realized it, a few men was standing outside the entrance that Ludo Wu was blocking.

The youngest one with the smallest stature walked to Ludo Wu.

「My father Ryada will live. But the tendons in his leg has broke, so he can't enter the forest anymore.」

「Right. Then you will be the house head tomorrow right? Shin Wu.」

「Yes, I will inherit my father's house.」

The man who spoke looked about Ludo Wu's age—— which means he looked younger than me.

He had a long head of dark brown hair, and deep brown eyes. His face seemed more mature than Ludo Wu, but their body was almost the same.

Ludo Wu turned and looked at that youth's smiling face, then said:

「You are taking it so easily. You will have to support five people by yourself... Hey, aren't you in a pinch?」

「It will be fine. My younger brother will be old enough in two years... Before that, I hope you can lend me a hand.」

「It doesn't matter if it is before or after, aren't we blood kins?」

Ludo Wu pretended to be mad and bump into the youth's shoulder.

The next moment, a clumsy smile appeared on Shin Wu's face, and he said:

「Ludo Wu. Thanks to you, my father Ryada managed to survive. I am proud to be your blood kin.」

「Don't put it that way! You are so annoying!」

「... Leaving that aside, Asuta of house Fa.」

「Huh? What?」

「We brought one kiba with us. Out of the three kiba we hunted, only one got 『bloodleet』 successfully. We are to follow your instructions next, that's Donda Wu's orders.」

After saying that, Ludo Wu jumped up.

「Wait! I can't work like this! I will clean myself up at the water source, so wait for me!」

Ludo Wu pushed Shin Wu away coldly, then turn to me and said:

「Listen up! Don't start without me! I will punch you all if you do that!」

The bloodied youth then sprinted away.

The youth and men left behind by him stood outside the building and stared at me.

「Ehh, can you make the preparation for the skinning? I will be right there after completing my work here.」

「—— Understood.」

「Then, I will bring you all there.」

Sati Lei Wu walked out of the stove room.

Only Lala Wu and me were left, and Lala Wu who had been quiet said with a sigh:

「Really now, even Ryada Wu got attacked by a kiba. Only women and children are left in Ryada's house, Shin Wu will have a hard time.」

「... How are they related to your family?」

「Hmm ~ ? Ryada is Papa Donda's youngest brother. Aside from Shin, there's just his mother, sister and two younger brothers. Shin is the only man who can hunt kiba right now.」

Her expression was serious, but her tone was forthright.

She was sincerely worried about the future of that youth Shin Wu.

「Their sister should get a husband to marry into their house soon, or else their family will need to be taken in by another house. He won't be able to watch over five family members after becoming the house head at sixteen.」

As an outsider, this wasn't a problem I could interfere with.

However, since Ludo Wu had kins like Lala Wu, that meant this youth wouldn't be crushed by the cruelty of fate—— I sincerely hope so.

「Well then, I'm going over first. This might take a while, so you can use this chance to grill some poitan for dinner?」

「... What do we do with these things?」

The results of my two hours of research was placed on the work platform made from logs, with faint steam rising from them.

With the gigo suggested by Lala Wu as the main ingredient, we tried pairing it with all sorts of vegetables, and cooked many pots of soup that uses poitan as the soup base.

To be honest... More than half of them was bordering on being strange food.

「Well, you can evaporate the really bad soup and make them into grilled poitan. We can't throw these food away.」

Grilling the poitan that had been cooked wouldn't make it more tasty, but I think it would be easier to eat it in a solid state.

「You are amazing, it's the first time I see someone turn food into garbage.」

「I admit my cooking skills is still immature, but please don't treat half complete works as trash! I will eat them properly!」

When I feel that the ingredient combinations was risky, I would just cook one or two person's portion. But I never thought it would be such a hard sell.

There were so many prototypes left behind because Lala Wu refused to eat after seeing my painful expression when I ate them. I hope to share this sin with everyone together, so I should make rock-paper-scissors popular in Forest's Edge.

「Thanks to you, I have found the gist of the way forward, just a little more before I finish this. Can I count on you for the rest of the day too?」

「Hmmp!」

I left Lala Wu who had turned her head away behind, and walked to the kiba butchering room. The food store was next to the stove room, and the butchering was right next to the food store

I just stepped into room when Sati Lei Wu stepped out. After greeting her, I entered the room.

「Uwah... It's a big one.」

A kiba about 90kg hung from a beam from the ceiling.

Its length was about the average height of a woman. Its horns and tusks protruding into the sky had a beautiful curve, it was a male kiba. They had washed the fur, as the dark brown hide was wet.

I had only saw the butchering from the outside before. It was a room without any decorations, with blades of various sizes hanging on the wall and a thick rope made from vines. There was just a stove that could heat a small pot, and no other furniture in sight.

Four men stood inside the room and looked at me silently.

They were Shin Wu, a man who was rather old and two men in their primes.

Aside from Shin Wu, everyone else had a burly body. They waited quietly for me to speak.

「Thank you for your hard work... Well then, let's start off by skinning it. Ludo Wu should be back soon. When he returns, we will start dismembering the kiba.」

One of the man nodded and pulled out a thick knife.

「Wait... Can you let me take care of the skinning?」

Shin Wu said:

「My father Ryada Wu couldn't move for the time being, so I have to skin the beasts by myself during this time. I know the steps to do so, but I want to use this chance to understand how tough this job is.」

The man who drew his blade turned towards the older man.

After seeing the older man nod, the man sheathed his knife.

「You have my thanks.」

Shin Wu said and drew his knife.

「Asuta of Fa house, can we skin it in our usual way?」

「Well, can you please leave as much fat on the meat as possible? Just to the extent of not damaging the hide..」

「—— Got it.」

The right hind leg of the kiba was tied with a rope, which hung the kiba up.

Shin Wu used his knife nimbly and cut from the inner right thigh all the way to the throat.

His blade glide across the limbs of the kiba. When the knife reached the trotters, he drew a circle around its ankles.

The steps he used to skin the beast was not much different from mine.

In order to dissolve the fats on the knife, they prepared hot water beforehand. Even for a culture from a different world, people still reached the same conclusion in order to achieve the goal of 「skinning」 .

If not for the incredible numbers of the kiba, and if people were only hunting them to eat their meat—— they would definitely think about ways to 「cook the meat deliciously」 .

When the denizens of Forest's Edge were living in their old home in the southern jungle, they only ate lizards or bugs. After coming to the Morga forest, they had to hunt kiba to obtain tusks and horns, and to safeguard the farmlands. And now, I plan to improve their technology in terms of meat processing.

The values of someone from another world like me allowed the denizens of Forest's Edge to make this improvement, and realize the concept of 「eating delicious food will make one happier」 —— the thought of this send a chill down my spine.

No one acknowledge my ways of doing this, no one admires my policies and no one agreed to my intent. I was just a lowly apprentice chef, while Forest's Edge have roughly 500 denizens. Will god really permit me to influence their food culture?

... If god doesn't allow it, then send me back to the scene of the fire.

If I had permission, then I will continue live in my own way.

If I suppress my personality, drink nasty poitan soup everyday and keep foraging for herbs and firewood—— That's not the life I want to live. I would rather die in a fire.

Ai Fa once complimented my cooking, saying it was 「delicious」 . She claim she 「likes」 my cooking and ask me 「not to disappear」 , she permit me to live in this world. I want to stay true to myself and live on with her.

While I was thinking that, Shin Wu already started to skin the kiba's hide, exposing its white inside.

He might be young, but he was still a denizen of Forest's Edge, his arm strength was on a completely different level from me, and he worked really fast.

Before I realized it, Ludo Wu was already standing beside me with his arms crossed as he looked at his kin.

Shin Wu had pulled off the hide from the limbs.

Next would be the real test.

This was a 90kg kiba after all. If it was me, I would probably need to spend 2 or 3 hours to handle this. Even with the arm strength of a hunter of Forest's Edge, this was no easy task.

Even so, no one complained or left the room. In front of this youth who will be a house head starting tomorrow, everyone just watched quietly as he skinned the kiba hide tediously.

Part 5

「Alright then, everyone will usually cut off the legs and throw everything else away correct?」

I stood before the kiba that had been stripped bare, and started explaining the butchering process.

「However, I want to use the meat from the torso in my cooking, so I will start to dismember the entire kiba. Right now, the most important part is taking out the organs.」

Ludo Wu, Shin Wu and the other three men listened to me with eyes so serious that it was bothering on being scary.

I didn't feel any disgust or hostility from them. I don't know the details, but I know these people wouldn't show too much emotions when they were working.

Since the clan head ordered them to work with me, the Wu clan members would remain professional even if they bore any ill will towards me. They were so meticulous that I had to think it that way.

「The kiba's organs are almost the same as that of a human. Heart, lung, liver, pancreas, kidney, stomach, large and small intestines and others—— Out of all these organs, I would like you to pay more attention to the large intestines, bladder and the gallbladder attached to the liver. If these parts got damaged, the bile and filth would leak and stink up the meat, and waste all the effort of blood letting.」

「...Asuta, I have only heard of the heart and stomach out of all this.」

「Yes, so you just need to commit them to memory after seeing the actual organs. Alright then, I will cut open its abdomen.」

「Wait, let me do it.」

Ludo Wu took a butcher knife hanging on the wall.

「You're right. Then, cut from the abdomen to the chest... Ah, don't cut from the bottom, but from the middle of the abdomen. The large intestines is in the lower abdomen, be careful not to damage it and just slice open the meat part.」

「Got it.」

Ludo Wu slowly push the knife tip into the kiba's abdomen.

「Then slowly cut to the chest, be careful when cutting the lower abdomen.」

Beads of sweat appeared on Ludo Wu's forehead.

Even though we opened the windows and doors, the room was very warm as there was a fire in the stove.

The room was filled with the stench of blood and fats, making it hard to breath.

Ludo Wu steadied the kiba's body encased in white fats with one hand, and carefully moved his blade.

「Yes, that's great. Then cut the diaphragm between the meat and the organs, yes, that membrane. You can eviscerate it after cutting the diaphragm.」

Ludo Wu nodded, then reached into the open cavity with his arm and knife.

He didn't seem to be bothered about reaching into the insides of an animal.

This youth was surprisingly capable.

He wasn't doing this for the sake of tasting delicious meat, but because of the deep respect he had for his work.

「I cut it. What's next?」

「Alright, take out the organs, start from the bottom abdomen. The large intestines there don't break easily, so just grab it out with your hands. Further in is the organ called bladder, be careful not to touch it.」

「Alright.」

He pulled the entire lump of intestines out.

The intestines got caught by the stomach mid way, so I cut it with my knife.

Ludo Wu carefully placed the intestines on a piece of fur laid out on the floor.

He then took out the heart, lungs, liver, testicles and bladder.

「Phew, the bladder breaks easily so be careful. If you have a small bag at home, you can cover the bladder with it before cutting it.」

The men nodded silently.

「Well then, we will start dismembering it. Since you have hung it up, let's cut it in half... Ah, no, scratch that. We need to cut off the head first.

Shin Wu skinning technique was better than mine, he skinned the body below the head rather cleanly.

So it was better to cut off the head then cut the body in half.

「Cut the neck with a knife, then saw the bones. There should be a woodcutting saw around here right? Sterilize it with boiling water first.」

I didn't know what germs or diseases existed in this world, but the denizens of Forest's Edge were very wary of raw and rotten meat. In such an environment, I had to pay attention to hygiene.

After sawing off the head, we cut the spine in half.

This was handled by the denizens of Forest's Edge who were stronger than I was, their movements were fast and precise.

Next, we cut off the limbs, cut across its waist. After dismembering the hip bones and other parts, the dismemberment were done.

「Next would be the head, cut off the meat at the neck and cheek—— Hmm, let's challenge kiba tongue another day.」

「What's kiba tongue?」

「The beast's tongue. In my home country, many people loves to eat this part. I think the organs can be made into a delicious dish too, but I don't know how to do so, or how long the pico leaves can keep it fresh. I have to leave such matters to another time.」

「Is that so? You even eat the organs huh. In that case, everything except the bones and hide can be eaten.」

「Not just that. After burning off the fur, the hide can be eaten too, and the bones can be used to brew soup. Now that you mentioned it, aside from the tusks and horns, all parts of it can be cooked.」

「It will be terrible if you guys eat the tusks and horns too.」

The entire room was filled with the suffocating stench of blood, flesh and organs, but Ludo Wu still laughed out cheerfully.

His smile is really brilliant. As I was thinking that, I continued 「Then——」 I used this term plenty of times today.

「That's all for the dismemberment. As for the bloodletting, we will only know if it was done completely after we eat it, but the butchering is done splendidly. Just hunting another two or three kiba would be enough meat for all the wedding participants. But in order to serve one spare ribs to everyone, we will need to hunt even more kiba, so I will be counting on your aid from now on too.」

The men nodded quietly.

「Okay, let's put the butchered meat into the pico leaves. Shin Wu, please cut off the tusks and horns.」

「Got it.」

「...Asuta, will the meat really become tasty like this?」

「Yes, if the blood letting is done properly.」

I nodded. We piled the mountain of meat onto a board, and carried it into the food storage.

「Let's try it tonight, I'm looking forward to it.」

「...I bloodleeted this one.」 Ludo Wu smiled bashfully.

「If the meat become delicious, doesn't that mean I'm really awesome?」

「That's right... Speaking of which, you two are really siblings.」

「Huh?」

「Your smile just now was just like Rimee Wu.」

The next instant, Ludo Wu's face turned beet red.

「What are you saying!? I'm not like that brat at all! Don't joke like that! Stu~pid!」

He was just like Lala Wu when he gets agitated.

Lala Wu who was very similar to him poked her head out from the stove room next door and asked:

「What's with all that ruckus? Asuta, the poitan for dinner is done.」

「Oh, really? I will come over right after settling this...」

Before I even finished, another group appeared.

Jiza Wu and Darum Wu were carrying a kiba that weighed about a hundred kilograms.

「Asuta, we hunted three more kiba, but only this one was bloodleeted successfully. What should we do next?」

「Huh, oh, please skin it first, I will be right there.」

「Got it.」

「Wait! Asuta, what should we do over here? We got lots of your trash like poitan soup over here!」

「Don't call them trash! I will be there after finishing...」

「Asuta.」

Even Kaslan Lutim appeared too.

His strong arms were carrying a 50kg young kiba.

「I brought the kiba we hunted over, the bloodletting should be done correctly.」

I was speechless.

「I understand! We will deal with the two of them at the same time! Please use the butcher room there, and skin it!」

「Asuta!」

「I get it! Erm, please cook the soup for dinner tonight! I will come over to instruct you on cooking the meat later!」

After assigning the tasks, I finally stepped into the food storage.

「... Aren't everyone back too early? And to hunt three kiba in just one day!」

「I don't know about house Lutim, but the Wu clan hunted six already, and bloodleeted two. We aren't that stupid.」

「Getting six in one day is plenty. Your kins in this village number less than sixty right?」

「Including the main and branch houses, there are 38 of us. So just hunting four kiba will yield enough aria and poitan for us. But things will slow down after the peak season. Dad and the others are probably still inside the forest.」

I see.

In that case, there will be enough meat for the banquet in no time.

I can then distribute the excess meat to the Wu clan branch family, and let everyone understand how delicious bloodleeted meat taste. They would then be free to choose if they want to use this bloodletting and butchering technique in their everyday life.

This must be what Kaslan Lutim meant when he said 「show them a path」.

They would make their own choice.

Without forcing anyone.

「What's the matter Asuta? Regretting about taking on this heavy job?」

The Wu clan's meat storage space was three times that of house Fa, Ludo Wu leaned his face my way as he pull apart the pico leaves.

「No, I'm really glad to have taken on this job, although it's very tough.」

Ludo Wu smiled gently when he heard me say that, and elbowed my arm as he said:

「I'm glad too. I'm looking forward to dinner tonight and the wedding. Asuta, don't let me down.」

「I understand, I will work hard.」

The work for this first day was coming to an end.

Part 6

And then—— the sun set.

This was the third time I ate dinner at the Wu clan.

The Wu clan family was already seated, and the plates laid out.

Dinner tonight was Chuck steak and thigh steak, soup brewed with chuck flap, aria and tino leaves, and a mountain of grilled poitan—— and also 『poitan soup』 prototype number one.

After Grandma Jiba finally got into her seat, I told everyone:

「This pot of soup near the bottom seat is the test dish I made for the banquet. Please don't think of this soup as dinner, and whoever want to try it please do. To be honest, this is still work in progress, and I have not decided on the menu yet.」

「.....」

「If no one tries it, my research won't be able to progress. So I hope everyone will try it and tell me your comments. That will be a big help.」

「... What are you yammering about?」

The clan head said with an annoyed face:

「Lutim asked us to help... Lala, distribute the soup to everyone.」

「Ehh ~!? Why me?」

「You are tending to the hearth today right? And you're the closest to the soup, so give it out to everyone.」

Despite reluctance written all over her face, Lala Wu still poured the 『poitan soup』 into the plates swiftly.

「... Hearth caretaker of the Fa house.」

「Yes, what is it?」

「You have an agreement with the eldest son of house Lutim, and the Wu clan heeded to house Lutim's request. That's all, the Wu clan don't have anything special relationship with you.」

「Yes, you are right.」

「... If you know that, then do your work properly.」

He was probably saying this to stop me from worrying about unnecessary things. As his words had his usual intimidating tone, it made me a little flustered.

I was probably holding back towards the Wu clan. Donda Wu saw through that.

Understanding this made me even more angry... I felt angry about my immaturity.

「... We give thanks for the forest's grace...」 Donda Wu recited the familiar words.

「... We give thanks to Mia Lei, Sati Lei, Lala and Asuta that our lives are extended for this night...」

And so, the dinner cum taste testing session began.

Because I had to help with the butchering of two kiba, dinner tonight was mainly done by the Wu clan members.

Including the hamburg steak for Grandma Jiba, I also instructed them on cooking the meat, but dinner was prepared by the Wu clan's women.

Only prototype one was made entirely by me.

The first one to sound out was Rimee Wu:

「Hmm? Everyone only has one bowl?」

Rimee Wu leaned towards the iron pot that was placed at the bottom seat and asked in astonishment.

「That's right, this is just a test sample, so everyone's portion is about two thirds of a poitan.」

「Oh, I see.」

She didn't look disappointed and put down her empty plate.

「How does it taste?」

「Hmm? Erm ~ I don't know.」

Okay, it couldn't be helped if she didn't know.

Poitan soup that had cooled taste even nastier. This idea had already taken root in everyone's heart, so the Wu clan finished the sample as soon as possible.

I peeked at everyone's expression—— Grandma Ditto Min has a face of doubt, Vena-nee was expressionless, the second daughter Leina Wu had a troubled face, and Ludo Wu had an obviously grumpy face—— This made me feel uneasy about the future.

By the way, the three hearth caretaker who had already taste tested it commented that 「something seems to be missing」.

I couldn't predict how these men would think.

Ai Fa ate quietly like the others, then put down her plate.

On a closer look, she had finished the sample dish.

「Ah, Ai Fa, how does it taste——」

「Terrible.」

Weird?

She seemed angry.

As I spent the entire day in the stove room, and this was the first time we spoke since noon. Did something happen when I wasn't around?

「... So, what did you add into this poitan soup?」

A few minutes later, when more than half the people finished their meal Grandma Ditto Min asked me.

「I'm researching on how to make the poitan soup more palatable. I only added Gigo, Tino leaves and salt.」

「You added Gigo? I can't tell at all.」

I still didn't know what Gigo was.

But I think it was very similar to 「Japanese Yam」.

Boiling Gigo in water would dissolve it, and turn it into a viscous Gigo soup. It might smell fragrant, but would taste very bland. And there were some fibres left as I didn't ground it up.

When cooked together with poitan, its viscosity would overwhelm the powdery texture of the poitan, making it easier to drink. After several attempts to cook it with other vegetables, I chose the safest tino leaves, and seasoned it to taste with rock salt.

This was just the soup base —— Below were everyone's comments:

「Well... It's drinkable.」 Grandma Ditto Min said.

「I don't hate it.」 Mama Mia Lei Wu added.

「It don't feel like food.」 Sati Lei Wu commented.

「I don't really know...」 Vena Wu said.

「It's easy to swallow.」 Leina Wu concluded.

「It feels unfinished.」 Lala Wu said.

「... I still don't know.」 Rimee Wu said.

This was just the soup base, so it wasn't finished yet. But it was hard to comment on a dish that wasn't delicious or bad.

Speaking of which, I also described the bun I bought in the post station town as 「average」 .

「I don't know. Why do I have to eat this. Don't cook something so boring, I was looking forward to it.」



Ludo Wu complained, he seemed to be the most dissatisfied.

But he showed a bright smile immediately after:

「But this grilled poitan is great, I already ate three.」

「Ah, yeah! It's tasty! It's soft and bouncy, Rimee ate a lot too!」

Rimee Wu seemed bored and kept changing seats. She was beside Ludo Wu right now, and heaped on praise for the poitan.

「Well, I added Gigo in it. After grilling the failures of my research, I discovered that its texture turns smooth.」

Speaking of which, I heard that adding yam into okonomiyaki will make it more fluffy and soft. No matter what, this was an unexpected great find—— But the problem this time was poitan soup.

Everyone then praised the grilled poitan and the meat dishes, and had already stopped commenting on the test dish.

By the way, Ai Fa was helping Grandma Jiba dine, and Mia Lei Wu who was accompanying Grandma Jiba was still eating. Once she and Grandma Jiba finished dinner, then the meal would be done.

「This might just be a test dish, but I still apologize for letting everyone eat something so bland. I hope no one is fazed, and will continue your support tomorrow.」

I was planning to conclude the session with these words, but Jiza Wu who had been quiet all this while called out my name:

「Asuta, we are helping you because clan head Donda already made an agreement with house Lutim, so don't worry too much. However... can I give you my opinion of that poitan soup?」

「Yes, of course.」

「I can't tell if it is good or bad. But if you want us to eat that, you might as well cook the old poitan soup instead... the other dishes like grilled poitan won't make me think that way.」

「I see...」

This dish was really unpopular.

Was my efforts being put in the wrong direction?

The room then turned silent. When Grandma Jiba finished dinner and Ai Fa was about to stand—— that voice rang out:

「... Why didn't you add meat?」

It was Donda Wu.

I was stumped momentarily because of surprise, then I answered:

「T-This is just a prototype, my goal is to fix the soup base, that's why I didn't add any meat. I also didn't consider if the soup will go well with the meat.」

「What do you expect to hear when you serve something so half hearted?」

He didn't sound like he was admonishing me, but his voice was unhappy as usual.

「The denizens of Forest's Edge will put all the ingredients into the soup, because this is the easiest way to cook. Even if we grill meat, we will still put meat into the soup. We might eat meat by itself, but we will never drink soup that only has vegetables in them... Don't serve such things to the table.」

Donda Wu slowly got up and said:

「Dinner is over... I'm turning in.」

That was the cue for dismissal.

The hearth tenders started tidying up, and the other family members returned to their rooms. As I was keeping the dishes gloomily, Ai Fa walked over, her annoyed expression could rival that of Donda Wu.

「Grandma Jiba is looking for you.」

After saying that, she grabbed her fur cape on the floor and quickly left the house.

Since Ai Fa wasn't tending to the hearth tonight, she didn't need to clean up, but didn't she need to repay the host for the meal and board? Or was it rude for the guests to clean up the cutleries? No matter what, I had to ask her why she was so unhappy. With that in mind, I walked towards Grandma Jiba.

「Asuta, thank you for your delicious cooking today... Your food taste really delicious...」

「No, Mia Lei Wu cooked the hamburg steak today, and it used the meat that Ludo Wu slaughtered. I merely instructed them and didn't do anything myself.」

「Is that so...? Mia Lei Wu didn't mention it at all...」

「She probably is just too shy to say so.」

Or maybe she wasn't the type to strive for credit.

In any case, that really suit that mother's style.

「So it won't be a problem tomorrow. Jiba Wu, you have to taste plenty of delicious food and live a long live.」

「I'm really glad... Asuta, I'm really really glad...」

Grandma Jiba held my hand with her bony and warm hands.

Leina Wu stood at the side so she could accompany Grandma Jiba back to her chambers later, and her eyes were moist.

「You brought light to the Wu clan. Not just me, everyone deeply feels the joy of living... The number of tusks and horns on your necklace is now ten. Did Donda gift one to you...?」

「... Yes.」

When I nodded, Leina Wu opened her eyes wide, and seemed to be sincerely surprised.

「Even that stubborn Donda acknowledge your strength... You are incredible, Asuta...」

「Not at all, I'm just an immature half-baked chef.」

When I said that, Grandma Jiba's frail back suddenly started to tremble.

「What happened? Do you feel unwell?」

Leina Wu held on to Grandma Jiba in a hurry—— but to me, Grandma Jiba was just laughing.

「... Asuta, that's not for you to decide, but for the people around you to consider... You just need to live as you please. Asuta, just keep things the way they are now...」

「Thank you.」

I bowed.

I will probably feel uncomfortable if anyone overestimated me. But when someone like Grandma Jiba says that to me, I could feel a warmth in my heart.

「... Next, about what Donda said...」

「Hmm?」

「For us, tossing all the ingredients into a pot is a representation of life... A young girl like Leina wouldn't know, but when we drink the soup with kiba meat and the grace that had been exchanged with kiba horns and tusks, our lives get to be extended for another night... So when we taste a soup without kiba meat, it will feels like something is missing...」

「... Yes.」

「Asuta, if you want to cook a soup that old bones like us can enjoy... then you should factor this in too.」

「I will. Thank you—— very much.」

Something squirmed in my mind.

Meat, it was meat after all.

Maybe the denizens of Forest's Edge wasn't seeking palatable soup.

Compared to the soup, the meat was more important to them. Without meat, there would be no kiba pot.

The key to the kiba soup lay with complementing the meat with the vegetable.

If I didn't set the right way to go about my research—— I might not be able to complete the menu in 4 days.

「... I will take my leave now. Asuta...」

「Yes, good night, Jiba Wu.」

After bidding farewell to Grandma Jiba and Leina Wu, I tidied up the cutleries.

Meat—— meat, meat, meat...

I placed the emphasis on the vegetables, but had to go back to research on the kiba meat.

Kiba was a worthy ingredient in the first place, it tasted great and had plenty of uses.

... By the way, I never imagined that Donda Wu's word would give me this hint.

I felt complicated, a little frustrated and happy at the same time.

In the end, only the second son Darum Wu kept quiet the entire meal, so this was a fruitful taste testing session. I would keep up this pace for the remaining days and work hard. With such intense emotions in my heart, I completed the clean up and left the Wu main house.

I lighted a borrowed candle stand I borrowed and walked through the quiet plaza.

Speaking of which, Ai Fa didn't go to Grandma Jiba's room, and returned to our room right away.

While I was thinking about that, I reached the house Ai Fa was waiting in.

I opened the door and found that the room was pitch dark.

「Hmm, Ai Fa, are you here?」

I raised the candle stand inside the room.

And Ai Fa was right there.

She was lying near the wall where the window was, with her back towards me.

Was she feeling unwell? Were there days when the energetic Ai Fa felt under the weather?

I felt worried, and rushed to Ai Fa's side without even locking the door.

「Ai Fa... are you sleeping?」

No reaction.

I realized that Ai Fa's back that was curved beautifully didn't move at all.

According to my past experiences, people who were asleep would have larger breathing animations, but I didn't know if this was correct.

Anyway, I was worried, and even though I was a little hesitant, I decided to wake Ai Fa.

「Hey, Ai Fa——」, my hand touched her bare shoulder.

The next instant, her palm hit hard at the back of my hand with lighting speed.

「That hurts! Are you awake? Then answer me!」

「... I'm sleeping.」

「You are awake! Hey, what's with you? Are you unwell?」

No matter what, I felt relieved after hearing Ai Fa's voice.

When I realized it, my back was drenched in sweat and my T-shirt was sticking to my back. I was more worried than I imagined. It was only natural for me to react like that, since Ai Fa had never acted so weird before.

If Ai Fa was really throwing a fit over something trivial, I will definitely protest. With such a thought in mind, I sat down beside Ai Fa.

「Hey, if you're not unwell, then look at me. You are acting strange right now, what happened?」

「... I said, I'm asleep.」

「But you are not! Can you stop that, I'm going to be angry alright?」

「... You will get angry?」

Weird.

Was I imagining things? Ai Fa's lean, beautiful and feminine back seemed to have an air of anger behind her.

No, it was just in my mind. Even though I could feel the rumbling of anger going 「Vroommmm...」, but that was impossible since this wasn't a manga.

「... You say that you will get angry?」

Uwah.

She propped herself up slowly in a smooth manner, like a leopard.

As she had untied her hair, her locks flowed down her shoulders and back sexily.

But she looked really scary, and I couldn't utter such praises.

「...I should be the one getting angry.」

Her glimmering blue eyes looked my way over her smooth shoulder.

Great, she hasn't shown the eyes of a hunter completely yet.

But I could still tell that she was angry.

「W-Why are you so mad? We have been working separately the entire day right? I didn't do anything to agitate you before we splitted at noon right?」

Maybe Ai Fa took a peek into the stove room before going back to our room when we came here last evening? I considered the possibility.

Even so, I didn't do anything that would anger Ai Fa.

The three ladies stayed by my side, and I didn't encounter anything special. Mama Mia Lei Wu who joined after that was the same as usual, and I got along well with Sati Lei Wu and Lala Wu too.

「Well, I didn't do anything wrong! If you're angry, then at least give me a reason!」

「.....」

「Well? What is it?」

「.....hamburg steak.」

「Hamburg steak? What about hamburg steak?」

「... You said that tonight's dinner will be hamburg steak.」

What?

When I realized it, Ai Fa was already pouting like a kid.

Ai Fa's eyes were burning with fiery rage, and her lips pouted childishly.

「W-Wait! When did I promised that? Ema Min came here early in the morning...」

「... You promised me on our way home yesterday.」

Ah.

I remember now.

On our way back from the post station town, when we passed the water source and was about to reach our home, I did say: 「Let's have hamburg steak tomorrow.」

After all, she asked me for this with the face of a child throwing tantrum like this.

「Y-You are right. Sorry! I was too engrossed in my research, and completely forgot about this. I had to explain the slaughtering process to the men, it was a busy day!」

「... I don't want to talk to idiots who break promises.」

Ai Fa turned her back to me again.

「What breaking promises!? You're exaggerating too much! It's only hamburg steak, why you heff to be mad...? That hurts!」

When I placed my hand on her shoulder, she hit me again.

「Hey ~ ! I apologize, it's my bad! Tomorrow! I will cook it for you tomorrow! I definitely won't forget! Ai Fa! Ai Fa-san!」

And that was that.

The first day of the wedding banquet preparation ended peacefully.

Interlude - An Unexpected Reunion

The four days before the banquet went by in a flash.

I worked hard to develop new dishes, taught the men to blood let and butchering, and impart my cooking skills to the women. I even need to figure out the work flow for the banquet, and it was hard to describe how busy I was.

Even so, the men and women of Forest's Edge were very diligent and quick to learn. They weren't exceptionally smart and capable, but because everyone did their very best. It stemmed from their strong sense of belonging to their 「family」, which affected their attitude towards 「work」.

They worked tirelessly. For their family and for survival, they didn't have any complaints. They didn't give the impression of a machine working coldly. When they do their work seriously as if it was their second nature, they showed emotions of joy and pain.

「Work」 and 「Survival」 were closely related. They were so honest because they were a tribe of hunters living in Forest's Edge.

No matter work, I'm very satisfied with such a work environment, and I think they are the best companions.

Worth mentioning were the women of Forest's Edge.

On the second day of the wedding preparation, aside from the Wu main house, the branch houses also sent a few women to help me.

However, their workload were very heavy. A platform and simple stoves had to be erected for the wedding, and people were needed to gather firewood and stones. As the men had to hunt in the forest, this job fell squarely onto the women.

Despite their heavy and laborious workload, they still needed to take time out of their schedule to learn some unknown cooking from me, which showed me deeply how much thought and effort they put into this. As a normal banquet only needed to serve the usual kiba soup and grilled meat, so they would just need to prepare the ingredients, and ensure there were sufficient food and firewood. There were probably many who thought that I brought them unnecessary hassle for the preparation of this wedding banquet.

However, after they test tasted the steaks and hamburg steak, they were astonished and happy, and started helping me in earnest.

As the men would bring two or three successfully bloodlet and butchered kiba everyday, I obtained enough meat for the banquet in no time. In the end, I gave the excess meat to the five branch families of the Wu clan, and the women almost cried tears of joy.

Compared to the men, the women cared more about 「delicious cooking」. I felt the same way when I stayed in the Wu main house last time.

This wasn't anything surprising. If their work could bring happiness and serenity to their family, it would be a great joy to the subjects themselves. If everyone shares this feelings with their family, their job would feel meaningful. As an outsider, I worry all the time that I would bring about a negative impact to the food culture of Forest's Edge —— But now, the satisfaction I feel was far greater than my fear and unease.

I had probably chosen the same path as Kaslan Lutim.

I hope everyone could be happier, and have deeper bonds with their families—— after hearing me say something so overreaching that night, he probably wanted to use his wedding to prove those words.

The men hunted kiba, bloodlet, skin and butcher.

The women forage for firewood, pick herbs, raise hearth fires and cooked the meat.

Without just one of these steps, and there wouldn't be any delicious dishes.

Everyone had to work together to achieve this goal.

That youth wanted to share this joy with his hundred odd kin, and obtain deeper bonds and greater strength.

I had to give it my all to meet his expectation.

In order to give greater joy to even more people in such a harsh environment, I felt a deep obligation to do my work properly.

Two days before the banquet, a small incident happened—— On the third afternoon of my stay in the Wu clan village.

「A-A-Asuta! It's terrible! Come with me for a while! The men are in trouble!」

Rimee Wu was the one who informed me of that commotion.

That day, I shut myself inside the stove room in the morning, and when the sun was at its apex, I started teaching the women how to make hamburg steak.

「What happened to the men? They will be setting off for the hunt soon right?」

Five women were in the stove room. They were Leina Wu, Ditto Min Wu and women from the branch houses.

Rimee Wu charged in with teary eyes.

「A strange man is here! There's a dangerous air between him and the men Darum-nii already drew his blade! It, it's really bad!」

A feeling of tension rushed through my chest.

「Who is that strange man? Is he from the Tsun clan?」

「No! It's someone from Rock City!」

「... What?」

「That man has a head of beautiful hair like Ai Fa! He even asked us where is the Fa house!」

I stood stiffly in shock.

A man from Rock City with blonde hair—— That must be Kamyua Yost. I couldn't think of anyone else.

But why was that man in Forest's Edge?

「—— Sorry, I need to leave for a while. Ditto Min Wu, can you explain to everyone to the best of your knowledge?」

「I can do that, but——」

「Asuta, it's dangerous for you to go!」

Leina Wu pulled at my hand.

Her expression was even more teary than Rimee Wu.

I regulated my breathing a little, then gently pulled away her soft shoulders.

「It will be fine, I won't do anything dangerous. Don't worry, I will be back.」

Rimee Wu and I charged out of the stove room.

We ran past the Wu clan's buildings, headed into the plaza and saw that scene immediately.

The entrance to the plaza was filled with people.

It was the time for the men to head into the forest. Since Ryada Wu retired, the Wu clan's men had been reduced to sixteen. They were all gathered here.

And then —— I could see the color of that familiar cloak from between the group of strong men.

「Wait—— Please wait!」

I shouted as I ran.

However, no one turned back or responded to me.

I could only feel Donda Wu who was a head taller than the others stole a glance at me.

「... Get lost! This is not a place a man from the city should visit!」

I finally heard a familiar voice.

It was the second son of the Wu clan, Darum Wu.

Darum Wu raised his sabre and faced off against that man.

And that man——

He was about Donda Wu's height, but he was really skinny, his body covered by a long leather cloak. This weird man who had the eyes that looked like an elderly and a child at the same time —— Kamyua Yost stood casually there.

「... Hi, we finally met, Asuta of the Fa house.」

He stared at the blade at his nose as he answered in a pretending to be retarded tone.

Darum Wu was close enough to lop off his head in just one step.

Despite that, Kamyua Yost still didn't reach into his cloak, and was still smiling leisurely.

「I'm just asking for the location of your house, but the situation became like this. I'm still glad to see you though. Ehh, we haven't met for four days right?」

「Shut up! I'm talking to you right now!」

Darum Wu roared.

A fire seemed to be burning in his eyes, which gave the image of a feral wolf twisting its face agitatedly. His entire body was giving out dangerous killing intent.

I went around the human wall formed by the men, walked to a position where I could see the two person facing off and stopped.

The next moment, Rimee Wu grabbed onto my left arm.

She actually followed me here. I turned my body to keep her petite body behind me.

「Asuta, can you plead for my case? I have no intention of harming them. As a 《guardian》, I just want to scout out the route, and pay you a visit since I'm in the area.」

「Stop talking! That will only complicate things!」

I might be panicking, but I wasn't retarded enough to speak with Darum Wu directly. I looked up at Donda Wu's gigantic body and said:

「Donda Wu! I have met that man once before! Four days ago, we got acquainted when we visited the post station town to procure food ingredients! I don't know if he is a good or evil —— but I don't think he is the type who will resort to violence!」

「Hey hey, you are saying a model citizen like me is——」

「Enough! Didn't I tell you to not speak?」

Donda Wu cast a sideways glance my way, then walked to Darum Wu's side.

「City man, you said you came to the Forest's Edge settlement for work.」

「That's right. I will be escorting a caravan from Genos to the eastern kingdom. I plan to pass through this settlement for the trip.」

Even though Donda Wu was intimidating as usual, Kamyua Yost maintained his normal attitude.

Their heights were similar, but the girth of their body had two times the difference. This was like a black bear facing off a praying mantis.

「I had not seen anyone so naive for ten years. Those people from a decade ago were also attacked by kiba during their journey there and got wiped out.」

「Yes, I heard a starving kiba would even attack the provisions of travelers... But who knows if that group was really attacked by kiba.」

Donda Wu narrowed his eyes.

His face and attitude didn't change, but just closing his eyelids slightly was enough to increase the sharpness of his gaze.

「Hey, what are you doing, retards?」

At this moment, someone poked at my head from behind.

I turned back, and saw Ludo Wu standing behind me. He pulled at our arms, his eyes almost turning completely into that of a hunter.

「Back off a bit more. Don't go so near someone who had drawn their blade—— Bratty Rimee, what are you doing!」

「S-Shut up!」

A smile appeared on Kamyua Yost probably because he heard our conversation.

This made Darum Wu's expression turn into more ferocious, and Donda Wu's eyes became even more narrow.

「... The chief Tsun clan is responsible for works related to the city. Why are you wandering around here without anyone guiding you?」

「They did offer to be my guide, but I told them 『It's fine, I'm just here to scout out the road, so I will go alone today.』 They agreed to this unhesitantly. Didn't the Tsun clan contact you?」

Anger immediately flared in Donda Wu's eyes, he was probably referring to someone not present when he cursed: 「Damn you.」

「So what business do you have with the Fa house? What's the relations between you two?」

His latter sentence was directed at me.

I had to make a choice here.

Should I spin a harmless tale? Or be direct and spill all the beans—— Which choice would be right for Ai Fa?

「... Asuta, you can just say the parts that is convenient for you.」 Kamyua Yost said to me quietly. And of course, everyone else could hear that.

With the thought 『Damn it, things will be much easier if Darum Wu cut him down right here!』 flashing across my mind, I made my decision.

「... When we were in the post station town, Ai Fa and someone from the Tsun clan got into an argument, and we were almost arrested by the guards. Mr Kamyua Yost here mediated for us.」

The next instant —— the blue flame in Donda Wu's eyes exploded.

Despite that, he still asked in a collected and low voice.

「What's the Tsun clan member's name?」

「He call himself Doddoo Tsun. He wasn't tall, but was rather bulky. A young man with an indistinct face.」

「Doddoo Tsun—— the second son of their main house.」

Donda Wu's beast-like eyes shifted from me to Kamyua Yost.

A happy smile appeared on Kamyua Yost's face.

「Asuta, aren't you being too humble? You didn't explain it clearly, so no one knows whether Ai Fa or Doddoo Tsun was in the wrong... Well that Doddoo Tsun was drunk in broad daylight, and brandished a knife against someone in town. And Ai Fa stopped him—— that's the truth behind that incident. It was wrong for the people in town to talk behind his back, but drawing a blade is still too much. The laws in Genos prohibits such actions.」

「.....」

「That man from the Tsun clan then abused his privilege and attempted to deceive the guards by pushing the crime on Ai Fa. When that happened, I testified what actually happened to the guards, and the incident ended peacefully. That's the gist of it.」

「... So, what business do you have with the Fa house?」

「Ara, spending time with Ai Fa and Asuta is very comfortable, so I wanted to meet with them and chat some more... Ah! I forgot to tell everyone that Asuta acted bravely and rescued Tara! Asuta, Tara wants to see you again too.」

I felt like screaming at him: 「Enough with you, shut your mouth.」

This man didn't tell any lies, but the words he said sounded so superficial.

「... This brat still needs to work, he don't have time to speak to a man like you.」

「Ah, I see. That's a pity.」

「Scram on home.」

「You are right. In that case, I will give up on that thought... Can I visit the Fa house another day?」

「... According to the rules, citizens of Rock City can't enter Forest's Edge as they please.」

「I see. Then I will make up a work related reasons the next time I visit.」

「Why you...」

Darum Wu said through gritted teeth.

When Kamyua Yost was speaking with us, Darum Wu's sabre was pointed at his nose.

However, Kamyua Yost just smiled at me as if it was nothing.

「Asuta, when will your job end?」

「The day after tomorrow. But——」

「Then, I will come again three days later.」

Kamyua Yost's strange purple eyes stared at Donda Wu.

「I'm a citizen of the western kingdom, the 《guardian》 Kamyua Yost. Hunter of Forest's Edge, can you tell me your name?」

「... I'm the head of the Wu clan, Donda Wu.」

「Wu clan's Donda Wu, thank you. I hope we can have a drink together some day.」

Kamyua Yost stepped back nimbly.

When Darum Wu wanted to pursue, Donda Wu's thick hand fell on his shoulder.

「Well then, I wish everyone to stay safe and healthy.」

Kamyua Yost left just like that.

Not just me, his appearance created a large ripple in the hearts of the Wu clan's men.

Chapter 4 - The Lutim Banquet (First Half)

Part 1

The sun rose from the east.

It was finally the day.

The wedding between Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min—— My first job has finally started.

「Yo... Oh, you're already up?」

When I woke up in an empty house within the Wu clan village, Ai Fa was already seated cross legged in the middle of the room and braiding up her blonde hair.

「... You are awake? It's still too early for work, sleep a while more.」

「No need, I can't sleep again once I get up. My fatigue is completely gone.」

I said while I stretched my back.

It was a nice morning.

And I was in a great mood.

「The banquet will last deep into the night. You won't have a chance to rest from afternoon until the banquet ends, so sleep a while more.」

Hmm, she was gentler than usual.

She was probably concerned because of my heavy responsibility today.

I had only woken up and her attitude made me really happy.

「It's fine, compared to the hardship for the past five days, this is nothing. We just need to follow the plan... That might be so, but completing the planned tasks isn't that simple.」

「In that case, you should conserve your energy. Just sleep.」

Strange?

I felt that she wasn't being considerate towards me.

「By the way, Ai Fa, you will be focusing on helping me today right? You won't have anything to do either if I don't get up.」

「.....」

「Where are you going so early in the morning?」

「... Before work starts, I plan to borrow their water source to cleanse my body.」

Her wild cat-like eyes glared right at me.

「So, go and sleep.」

「Hey... Since you have told me that beforehand, that previous accident won't happen again right? Do I look like a man who will repeat the same mistake?」

「.....」

「You think I do!? What a shame...! I get it. If I violate that intolerable taboo again, I will hand over my eyeballs like the rules dictate.」

「... Who will want your eyeballs.」

You want me to marry into your family then? —— Before I let these words slip, I stepped out of the room alongside Ai Fa.

Speaking of which, Ai Fa was planning to stay in the Wu clan village until this morning, and then return to the Fa house until the next morning. She said: 「I'm from the Fa house, and don't have the rights to attend the Lutim house banquet.」

Hence, I told her: 「That's too retarded!」, and appointed her as my assistant chef in an attempt to make her stay.

While Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu were both participating in this grand banquet, Ai Fa would be home alone, drinking the kiba pot she cooked for herself... Just thinking about this scene breaks my heart.

When I told Kaslan Lutim about this, he agreed without hesitation and said: 「Let's do what you proposed.」 He was even surprised about this, and seemed to think that Ai Fa was going to attend the banquet in the first place. Kaslan Lutim was willing to let someone not related to him by blood to tend to the hearth on his wedding day, and was part of the reformist denizen of Forest's Edge. Compared to him, Ai Fa was stubborn and inflexible.

Ai Fa was reluctant at first, but after I sincerely implored her to: 「Let me perform the task of a Fa house hearth tender on that day.」, she finally relented.

And so, we could head to the Wu clan now side by side.

We surveyed the plaza that had been prepared for the banquet, then strode forth slowly.

There were about ten stoves in the plaza.

All of them were simple stoves erected from white stones.

Their design would result in the heat leaking out, and couldn't meet my requirement for heat control. Hence, the family members would cook the dishes at their own homes, and these stoves were only used to keep the food warm.

A large stage for the newly wedded couples were erected in front of the Wu main house. As a bonfire would be needed for the ceremony, planks were piled up inside the plaza. These were all made by the Wu clan women during these few days.

This space was about the size of half a school field, and would definitely be a crowded event if a hundred or so people came in here.

Just the thought excites me.

So my emotions got even more tense.

That many people would taste my dishes.

I felt gleeful about that—— and fearful at the same time.

My heart started racing, but I calmed down when I glanced at the side profile of Ai Fa walking besides me.

Ai Fa had her usual expression.

「Hmm ~ ... Can I say something mushy?」

「Allow me to refuse.」

「Spending time with you from morning made me feel at ease.」

「... Which means, you want to follow me to the water source?」

「Not that! You should forget about that already!」

Ai Fa shrugged, unlike her usual self and answered:

「That's because these five days are special. We will be back to our usual routine tomorrow anyway.」

「Yes, that makes me glad too.」

Ai Fa glared at me with her face slightly blushed.

It was rather embarrassing for me to say that too, but it felt like a victory for me.

「But Kamyua Yost will probably visit the Fa house tomorrow.」

「That's right... Speaking of which, he actually dare enter Forest's Edge alone, just how thick insensitive is he? He might really get cut down by Darum Wu.」

「.....」

「Hmm?」

「Darum Wu can't kill that man.」

It was so early in the morning, yet the conversation was heading in a scary direction.

While we were chatting, we went around the two meter tall stage and reached the Wu main house. We ran into Grandma Ditto Min who was just walking out of the entrance with a hand axe.

「Ara, it's Ai Fa and Asuta, you two are early today. The girls had gone off to the water source, aren't you going too, Ai Fa?」

Ai Fa's gaze stabbed hard into my cheek.

I will absolutely not go there! I wanted to emphasize that, but Grandma Ditto Min was here too, so I couldn't rebuke openly.

「Asuta, you are going to the stove room right? I'm on my way to the back of the house, so I will bring you there.」

「Thank you. You are chopping wood so early in the morning...? Sorry for burning so much wood.」

「That's right, it's the first time I have seen the firewood deplete so fast. No matter how much I chop, I couldn't keep up with your rate of burning.」

「I'm very sorry.」

「I'm just kidding, this is all for the sake of delicious food.」

Grandma Ditto Min smiled a little, or should I say smiled gently? Anyway, it was a relaxed smile.

My father was on bad terms with his family, and my mother's parent passed away early, so I didn't have any memories of my grandparents. Grandma Ditto Min was always gentle, kind and always composed, giving off an air of silent dignity. I think she was an incredible grandmother.

Grandma Jiba's son married Grandma Ditto Min, and fathered Donda Wu. Donda Wu and Mama Mia Lei then had seven children. Their eldest son Jiza Wu and Sati Lei Wu sired Kota Wu—— The Wu clan's bloodline thus passed down through the generations.

When the other six children marry, I hope to care take the hearth just like today.

But as long as Donda Wu remained as the clan head and Jiza Wu was still the heir, this was unlikely to come true. In this five days, I have grown to respect and like the Wu clan members, that was why I had such a daydream.

「Well then, I will be intruding the water source for a while.」

Ai Fa glared at me once last time before disappearing at the end of a path covered in vegetation.

This wasn't laying the foundation for something or anything ominous, but I swore in my heart that I would not go near the water source before they come back.

Grandma Ditto Min didn't know what I was thinking and open a small gap to the stove room, food store and butcher room. She then told me: 「Please use them as you like.」

This practice was a bit cumbersome, and a family member had to open the doors for me so early in the morning. But as the doors in Forest's Edge wasn't locked, there was such a custom.

Well then——

The banquet will start in the evening.

And so, I had to cook all the food before evening. At this point of time, I had to prioritize one job.

Which was the new dish I developed just for today—— 『Kiba and Tarapa stew』 .

What should I do to make the liquid poitan delicious?

This was the answer I found.

In the end, the tomato-like 「Tarapa」 became my companion instead of the yam-like 「Gigo」 .

Compared to the other dishes, this stew needed to be cooked for a longer time, so I had to prepare it early. Once it was done, it just needed to be reheated when the banquet begins, a dish suited to be prepared early.

I brought out the bag I prepared yesterday from the food store. It was filled with the aria I picked yesterday, and all of them needed to be diced.

Adding these aria was for the sake of increasing its fragrance, but the amount of aria needed was astounding. There was more than a hundred guests, so I had to start by dicing 50 aria.

Even if it was just one plate, I hope all the participants could taste this dish. With that in mind, I estimated that this dish would require four pots.

I repeatedly cut the onion-like aria. If they were real onions, I should be crying my eyes out now. But aria didn't sting the eyes, so I worked hard in dicing them.

After ten or so minutes, I realized something after dicing all the aria——

There was no pots!

Right, the women would wash the previous night's cutlery when they went to bathe.

Yes, that was right, and if I head to the water source now, they would think I'm an absolute madman. Fortunately, Leina Wu whose hair was dripping wet brought over a freshly cleaned pot in a panic, so there wasn't any tragedy.

「S-Sorry! I heard that you have started cooking, so I washed one pot first and brought it over!」

「Thank you Leina Wu, you are a big help.」

She probably haven't finished bathing, her long black hair wasn't tied in her usual low pony tail, but flowed down her shoulders freely. Her completely different look surprised me.

She covered her body with one large cloth like a married woman, which felt really refreshing.

「Ah, s-sorry! I'm dressed so shabbily...」

Leina Wu said with a red face, although her dressing was less exposed than usual.

「Erm... I will bring the rest of the cooking wares back after I clean them all...」

「It's fine, I won't go near the water source.」

Leina Wu sighed in relief, then hurried out of the stove room after saying 「I'm going off now.」

She was that worried... While I was feeling a little hurt, I started a fire in the stove to heat the pot. After adding in kiba fats, I tossed the diced aria into the pot.



As 50 aria was really too much, I split them into five batches.

I carefully fry the aria until they were caramel colored. To add fragrance, I poured in fruit wine, and scooped everything out once the alcohol evaporates.

After repeating five times, it was time to deal with the meat.

I prepared 15kg of thigh meat and shoulder meat each, totaling 30kg. It was an amazing amount, and I cut them all into bite size.

When I chopped all the meat, an iron pot wobbled in.

Rimee Wu was hiding beneath it.

「Sorry for the wait! The others will bring the other two pots later!」

「Yes, thank you.」

Rimee Wu seemed to have bathed properly. Her red hair looked really soft, and she was wearing her usual attire.

「You are already preparing the stew? Rimee will help too!」

「Ah, really? In that case, can you help bring the Tarapa over? I asked for eight more yesterday.」

「Tarapa huh, got it...! Heehee.」

「Hmm? What is it?」

「Nothing. Asuta, you are a nice person. That's great.」

Rimee Wu said that, and then ran off into the food store.

Hmm?

Because I started working so early in the morning?

It would be great if that was so... I started grilling the kiba meat.

I just need to grill the surface of the meat until it becomes golden. I nimbly grilled the meat with the large pot, and then scoop up the grilled meat onto the wooden plates.

I might sound simple, but there were 30kg of meat. After a while, the entire stove room was filled with the thick aroma of meat and fats.

Next would be aria. These complements the stew, and wasn't added to increase the fragrance. There were fifty of these too, and I repeatedly cut them into semi circles.

While I was doing this, eight tarapa were placed on the other work station thanks to Rimee Wu's efforts.

They were a vegetable that looked like tomato, but had the size of a pumpkin.

It had an uneven surface, so it looked really similar to a pumpkin.

But it had the taste and color of a tomato.

I originally said that this vegetable wouldn't play a big role this round, but in the end, it formed the main taste of this dish.

「There are so many ari! Should Rimee help to cut them too?」

「Ah, can you help me bring the tino leaves and chachi over? Bring everything packed in a bag.」

「Got it!」

It was still early, but Rimee was really energetic, forthright and cute. If she was my daughter or sister, I would definitely dote on her.

While I was thinking that, the other sisters of the Wu clan and Ai FA returned with the pots and cutlery.

Seemed like I didn't need to gouge my eyes out.

「Look, we brought it back... Really now, when we heard that you have started preparing the food, we got really nervous.」 Lala Wu whispered to me.

So they really heard about this, and sent Leina Wu over—— I showed a vague smile.

「... You didn't visit us today huh...?」 Vena-nee said softly into my ear.

What was she saying? If I really showed up, she would be blushing til her ears turn red though.

「I will switch with Mama Mia Lei. We will help you when we are finished over there.」

「Thank you, Lala Wu.」

「... You should know right? Mama Mia Lei and the others will be showering next.」

Of course I know, I know that from the bottom of my heart.

Speaking of which, who did they think I was?

「Phew, it's heavy.」

At this moment, Rimee Wu came back.

Her bag contains six tino leaves. Each tino was about the size of a slightly larger cabbage. But Rimee Wu could carry an iron pot, so such a weight wasn't too much of a problem for her. The bag was probably too bulky, which made it hard for her petite body to carry.

There wasn't anyone more likeable than her.

「Asuta, sorry for the wait! Next is the Chachi right? 」

「I will get it. Rimee Wu, why don't you help him cut the vegetables? 」

「Yes! 」

Ai Fa walked quickly to the food store, and Rimee Wu took a vegetable knife from the wall.

That was how diligent the denizens of Forest's Edge was.

Once they grasp the steps, they would proceed with the task with amazing efficiency.

「Rimee Wu, I will leave the tino to you, you know what size to cut it? 」

「Yes, bite saizu! I don't know what saizu means though! 」

Rimee Wu wield the kitchen knife happily.

After settling the crockery the three older sisters went out of the door. Ai Fa who pass by them came back with a bag of Chachi.

「Is this Chachi? What should I do? 」

「Ah, please peel them. It can be peeled easily by hand. 」

Chachi was a fruit that was very similar to mandarin with yellow skin.

After peeling it, the smooth white ball on the inside would be revealed.

When Ai Fa squeezed it unintentionally, the white liquid inside ejaculated out.

「Uwah! 」

Ai Fa screamed, then kicked my leg.

「Why did you kick me!? 」

「... Shut up. 」

「Ahaha! 」

Rimee Wu laughed.

When I realized it, only me, Ai Fa and Rimee Wu were in the stove room.

I felt more at ease now, so I will ignore her unreasonable kick.

「After peeling them, wash it with water until the sticky fluids are gone. 」

Chachi was a new member I discovered in the food store.

It had the appearance of a mandarin, but the content was like that of a potato. Ignoring poitan that looks like a potato, chachi had the exact same texture and taste of a potato.

After splitting the chachi Ai Fa washed, I cut them into bite size of about 3cm wide.

And so, the preparation was complete.

After dicing the fifty aria, I fried them before hand to enhance its aroma.

The other fifty aria was cut into semi circles.

Thirty chachi was cut into bite size.

The 6 tino was also cut into bite size.

The kiba shoulder and thigh meat that had been grilled on the surface weigh 30kg in total.

And—— eight giant tarapa.

Before dealing with the accursed poitan, I needed to handle this smaller items.

Conversely speaking, I couldn't tackle the poitan if I didn't use that many ingredients.

I already did what I can.

The poitan soup that was like flour water, thick and hard to swallow.

Why was the poitan so difficult to deal with?

I first assumed that the variety of spices available in Forest's Edge was too limited, so the poitan soup tasted so bland.

Aside from rock salt and pico leaves, the only other seasoning in Forest's Edge was fruit wine. Hence, their food had a lighter taste. They could cook high quality stock from the meat and vegetables, but that wasn't enough to neutralize and unique texture of the poitan.

At this moment, I remembered the existence of vegetable stew.

Vegetable stew made used of flour to give it a thick texture.

It would be difficult for me to make beef stew or cream stew with the ingredients in Forest's Edge.

Right then —— I noticed the tarapa's strong taste.

Tarapa was even more sour than the tomato I tasted in the past, but by using aria that enhance the aroma of the dish, fruit wine that was similar to grape wine, and pico leaves which was akin to pepper, I could replicate a tomato sauce like taste. I decided to use this taste as the foundation to cook a unique vegetable stew.

In other words, I combined the popular 「beef stew」 and 「hamburg steak with tomato sauce」 that were popular in 《Tsurumi restaurant》, and create a completely new dish.

「Okay, please help me start the fire in the other stoves. It has to be strong, but not too strong.」

As I said that, I tossed in about a quarter of the ingredients into the heated pot.

They were the aria which was a substitute for onion, the substitute for cabbage tino, and the replacement for potato Chachi, these three vegetables.

After the aria softened, I put the kiba into the pot, and added an entire bottle of fruit wine, filling the entire stove room with a sweet fragrance. After the water was brought to a boil, I scooped up the foam and added large amount of water with a ladle.

I added water until the pot was 80% full.

After adding a certain amount of water, I weakened the stove's fire.

I had to cook this dish for two hours, and evaporate half of the content.

Since Forest's Edge didn't have ready made stock for sale, I had to make full use of the ingredients.

I dealt with the three iron pots one after another, but stopped when I reached the last one.

「Erm, Rimee Wu, I plan to use this fruit wine in another dish. Sorry, can you give me another bottle of fruit wine?」

「Hmm? Huh? Now you mention it, the shape of the bottle is a little different.」

In her hands was the fruit wine Kamyua Yost gifted to us.

I had been thinking about how to use it to cook. I asked Ai Fa to bring it here from home three days ago, and it will still be some time before this thing makes its debut.

After pouring in another fruit wine Rimee Wu got for me, the last pot was done, and the work was finished for now.

We wiped away our sweat and cooled off at the door.

As we needed to scoop up the foam and add firewood periodically, we couldn't go too far away from the stove room.

「This is great. Not only did you add poitan, you also put in tarapa! This is the first time Rimee see a kiba pot with so many vegetables.」

「That's probably so. We will be celebrating tonight, so I added a bit more.」

The pot that cooked all the meat and vegetables together was a representation of life.

The aria and poitan were vegetables the denizens of Forest's Edge had to eat in order to live healthily.

As these two vegetables were cheap, this practice took root in the life of the people of Forest's Edge—— however, this had been passed down in Forest's Edge for eighty years, and I had no intention of changing it. What I should do, was to cook the unpalatable ingredients into delicious food.

That was why I thought of grilling the cooked poitan instead of boiling it in the pot. However, poitan in solid form might look very alien to people who had only drank poitan soup.

I racked my brains for their sake—— after that, Grandma Jiba and Donda Wu told me that 「cooking all the ingredients in one pot is a symbol of life」, inspiration struck me, and I came up with this 「kiba and tarapa stew」.

Right now, I was using the techniques of cooking beef stew to simmer these vegetables.

Next, I will be cooking tarapa next to make tarapa sauce, which would become the base of this dish.

After that, I will add poitan and create the texture of a stew.

I thought of adding cream in the flour to make coffee colored batter, but had no luck so far. After all, there wasn't anything like cream in Forest's Edge. When I tried frying the powdery poitan with kiba fats, it would just burn the poitan.

However, even if I add the poitan into the soup, it could still achieve the thickening effect.

Furthermore, this also match the concept of 「cooking the symbol of life」.

I felt that doing this was too frivolous, but the end product was rather good. As long as the ratio of poitan was right, I could achieve the texture of a vegetable stew.

Within the five days limit, this was the answer I got after doing all I could.

This dish was an appetizer.

Before serving the hamburg steak, spare ribs and grilled poitan that might look weird to them, I plan to use this dish to open their hearts.

Only god knows how this would end.

「I normally won't use large amount of expensive vegetables to cook lavish dishes either. I only relented because this is an occasion worth celebrating for.」

「I think it's great! This dish is super tasty... Of all the dishes you taught us, this might be Rimee's favorite!」

「I see. Then when your sister marries, you can cook them for everyone.」

「Huh! Asuta, won't you cook it for me!？」

Rimee Wu was taken aback with surprise written all over her face.

「You know too, right? Considering the temperament of your Papa Donda, he will never let me tend the hearth when the Wu clan host a wedding.」

「Ah! It's fine! Because...」 the innocent girl said with a mischievous expression:

「... The day before yesterday, when Papa Donda ate the vegetable stew, did you see his expression? He said 『Woah』 you know? 『Woah』.」

「He did make a sound, I thought he was going to flip the pot over from rage.」

「Not at all! Because the vegetable stew was too delicious, that's why he made a sound! He almost said 『delicious!』.」

「Really? That's hard to imagine.」

「That must be it! Rimee knows very well...! When Rimee marries, you must cook it for me alright?」

I was at a loss for words.

I stole a peek sideways—— Ai Fa was watching the small flame within on hearthstone quietly.

As Rimee Wu looked at me with expectant eyes, I placed my hand on her small head and said:

「That's true... when the time comes, I will definitely cook it for you.」

If I was still in this world when that day comes.

Part 2

The three of us chatted mindlessly, and added firewood into the stove occasionally. A while later Lala Wu and Leina Wu came back.

「Hey, we brought the pots here!」

Like what they said, each of them had an iron pot in hand.

This was the iron pot they borrowed from the Wu branch family.

Of the seven Wu houses, the main house has the widest stove room, so I used this place as the base. But there were only four of the crucial pots here, and I had to use pots to cook the stew first, so we decided to gather all the people and pots from the branch houses in the main house.

So far, the women from the branch house had been taking turns to help, but all of them would be available on this day. They were already drying the poitan and cutting vegetables in their own homes right now.

I had to set up a roster for this, and assign the dish each house would be responsible for. I also needed to estimate the crockery and number of people needed, and calculate when the dishes would be done. For me, this was the hardest job.

「What will these pots be used for? Making the tarapa for the stew?」

「That's right. Since we have enough people, let's do this first. After finishing this, we can relax a while before noon.」

I left the job of simmering the vegetables to Ai Fa and Rimee Wu, and followed Lala Wu and Leina Wu outside to make tomato sauce, no, tarapa sauce.

A lot of tarapa would be used, but the cooking method was rather simple.

I mixed the fried diced aria, large chunks of Tarapa and fruit wine together to simmer, and seasoned it to taste with salt and pico leaves, and its done.

I think adding some garlic and lilo would make it better, this was already acceptable sauce. Making this into stew requires quite a bit of effort, but I hope the Wu clan could make use of it in the future by pouring it onto their meat dish or simmering vegetables with it.

「How incredible! That super sour tarapa is so tasty now.」

Lala Wu said quietly as she stirred the contents to avoid the boiling red tarapa from burning.

「This is thanks to the aria and the sweetness of the fruit wine. I should have thought up this dish sooner.」

In this five days, Lala Wu's hostile attitude gradually softened.

She always speak sarcastically because of her nature, but if you don't anger her, she was a frank and cute girl.

「Ah, Lala Wu, you mentioned that you hate tarapa right?」

「Yes, but now, it's my favorite.」

That was how she was.

I thought she hated me with a passion, but talking to her now filled me with warmth.

At this moment —— I felt a vicious gaze fell on my cheek, and turned to check.

Leina Wu averted her gaze with a lonely expression on her face.

... How should I put this, I thought glaring at me coldly during situations like this was Ai Fa's trademark.

While I was feeling troubled, Ludo Wu appeared with a yawn.

「What, you all have started working already? It's so hot—— hey Asuta, let's go and bathe. The girls already bathed right? 」

「No, I will go later. After I finish the dish, I can take a break. 」

「There are only two stoves, why are the three of you sticking together here? Or they can't help at all if Asuta isn't here? All the men learned how to butcher the kiba already you know? 」

「Shut up! Go bath if you two want to! We don't need Asuta! 」

Why must I suffer damage in this situation?

「Please go, we'll watch the pots. 」

Leina Wu's eyes had a hint of loneliness and gloom, but she still spoke to me with a smile.

「I get it, I will accompany you... Have the mothers finished bathing? 」

「If it's a wedded woman, you can't marry into the family okay? 」

「What I mean is... 」

「You will just be killed by dad and Jiza-nii. 」

「That's why I'm checking with you! 」

「E-Erm, Sati Lei and the others have already come back, that's why we can come here... 」

Leina Wu blushed a little, as she said timidly.

No good, out of everyone present, she was the one who will suffer in silence the most, I should hurry on to the water source.

After telling Ai Fa and Rimee Wu who were also in the room, I left the building with Ludo Wu.

「Ludo Wu, it's rare for you to invite me to the bath. 」

「Well ~ I wanted to ask you something. 」

Ludo Wu walked as if he was kicking out his legs alternately, and looked at me with her pale colored eyes.

「Have you asked that thing yet?」

「Ask what?」

「『Sacrificial hunting style』.」

「Ah.」

Oh no.

I completely forgot about this.

That was careless of me!

I was really busy recently, but that wasn't an excuse.

Ai Fa hunted alone, but her kiba kill count was rather high. Ludo Wu hinted that Ai Fa might be using the 『sacrificial hunting style』—— and if I wanted to know what 『sacrificial hunting style』 was that I should ask her.

How could I forget something so important? I wanted to grab my head and shout because of my own retardedness.

I still didn't know how serious this matter was. The phrase 『sacrificial hunting style』 sounded ominous, and Ludo Wu's abnormally serious expression when he said this term made me uneasy.

In that case, I could only interrogate the person who made me worried.

「Sorry, I completely forgot about that... Can you tell me what 『sacrificial hunting style』 is?」

「If you didn't ask, then forget it. Ask your house head if you want to know.」

「There will be people around me for this entire day, is it fine for others to hear about it?」

「It's fine for the woman to hear it. They won't know what that is anyway... But I will suggest you don't let dad learn about this.」

「Then I can't ask Ai Fa, I don't want to seal Rimee Wu's lips.」

Ludo Wu glanced at me sideways again.

He was making an incredibly annoyed face.

「Really now... 『sacrificial hunting style』, is an archaic way of hunting by using fruits that attracts kiba. When those fruits are smashed, it will release a scent that the kiba loves, and lure them out. That's all.」

「Hmm? It sounds simple, but it has a terrifying name.」

「... I heard that the kiba will become ferocious when they smell that scent. Normally, they would flee if they saw a man appear from far away. But if that man had this scent on him, they would attack agitatedly.」

「What...」

「This hunting method uses yourself as a living sacrifice, that's why it's called 『sacrificial hunting style』. It doesn't matter how many lives you have if you resort to this method. Hence, no one uses it anymore.」

「.....」

「It is unlikely for Ai Fa to use that method, but she managed to hunt so many kiba. I'm curious how she managed to haul in so many wild games.」

「... The fruit that lures in kiba...」

「Hmm?」

「Does it have a sweet flowery fragrance?」

Ludo Wu didn't just look my way, he turned his entire face towards me.

He narrowed his eyes slightly in surprise.

「Who knows, I have never seen that fruit before.」

「That's true...」

I have only smelled that sweet flowery fragrance from Ai Fa.

If that was the scent of the fruit that lures in kiba...

「Dad hates people who don't cherish their lives the most. If a hunter ever use it, he will definitely show a face of scorn.」

「... Yeah.」

「But I respect someone like that. I think anyone who will go so far for the sake of hunting kiba is amazing. Acting like this might seem foolish, but it is also cool, so I will respect such a person.」

「.....」

「Asuta, listen to me.」

Ludo Wu suddenly grabbed me by the chest and pulled me over.

The youth's face was right before me.

「If you encounter such hunters, you should respect them. Not worry, but respect.」

「... I know.」

Ludo Wu let go without hesitation and sauntered forth once again.

I couldn't help sighing, and scratched my head through my bandana.

At this time, we could see the wooden board that represents the Wu clan's water source.

「Ah~ looks like today will be a hot day.」

Ludo Wu said and went to the other side of the board.

I thought about Ai Fa who was waiting for me in the stove room, and went in after Ludo Wu——

And I almost screamed.

「Hmm? Jiza-nii, Darum-nii, you are here too? 」

Yes, Jiza-nii and Darum-nii were here.

In a way, the eldest son and second son of the Wu clan were harder to get along with than Donda Wu.

Ludo Wu tossed his clothing aside without hesitation, then carefully placed his necklace on the ground.

This was a knee deep stream.

The terrain in the vicinity were rocky. Behind the stream was a tall cliff, and the woods could be seen on top of it. The two hunters were sitting in the stream and using a palm size cloth to wipe their bare brown bodies.

「Wah, icy! 」

Ludo Wu jumped into the stream and yelled excitedly.

I wasn't excited at all.

Jiza Wu glanced at me, then quietly wiped his body.

A fire burned in Darum Wu's eyes, and he wash his body silently too.

Who could get excited in such a situation?

I couldn't flee just like this, and had no choice but to strip.

I took off my vest, t-shirt and the rest of my clothes, then placed my necklace onto the ground.

I walked downstream to the back of the two men, and sat down quietly.

「Darum-nii, why are you showing such a scary face!? Today is a day of celebration! 」

After saying that, Ludo Wu kicked out his right leg that was in the water.

The huge amount of water all splashed onto Darum Wu's head.

Arrggghhh, I almost fainted from panic.

Darum Wu stopped all his movement for an instant, then continued wiping his body nonchalantly. I couldn't see his face from where I was, so that was even more terrifying for me.

Even if I couldn't see his face—— the bodies of the Forest's Edge men were really shocking.

In this one month, my body loss its fats due to hard manual labor, and my muscles grew. Although my body turned lean, my weight increased, and I became a hunk for the first time in my life. However, compared to the men of Forest's Edge, I was just a skinny monkey.

First of all, our skeletal structure was completely different. The men of Forest's Edge had wide shoulders, thick chests, long and slender necks and limbs.

Their build was lean, but they had incredible back muscles.

Because their muscles were balanced, their bodies feels proportionate when they were clothed. Their body only had necessary muscles without any fats. Like Ai Fa, their torso was a combination of functional beauty and streamlining.

On a closer look, their wrists were thick and had big hands. Not only were their fingers long, their palm were massive too. They could definitely crush my hands easily in a handshake.

However—— just like Ai Fa there were numerous white scars on their brown skin.

Getting gored by a kiba was likely to be a mortal wound. These injuries were probably inflicted when they were moving in the dense woods or rocky terrain.

They were hunters of Forest's Edge.

「Why are you dazing out? This is an once in a lifetime big project.」

With these words, a torrent of water splashed onto me.

Ludo Wu jumped into the water in front of me.

「Wash your body thoroughly! This is a day of celebration for the Lutim house!」

「I-I get it... Ludo Wu, you are energetic so early in the morning.」

「Hmm? Fufufu. Of course! I get to eat delicious food everyday, which fills me with energy! I feel that I can lift a kiba with one hand!」

Ludo Wu had a happy smile on his face.

When he make this face, he looked as cute as a girl.

Even though his body was toned like a feral beast, he was shorter than me, and not as buffed as his brothers. Even though I was weaker than him in strength, his child-like appearance made me feel at ease.

「The Wu clan women are fine now. I didn't do much for dinner these five days, and they had practiced how to make hamburg steak repeatedly. From tomorrow onwards, they will definitely continue to cook delicious meals for you.」

「.....」

「Hmm? What's the matter?」

「Asuta, no matter what you say, you will do so on the precondition that 『things will be fine even if you are not around』, that makes me so mad.」

「Huh? But I shouldn't be tending to the Wu clan's hearth in the first place. Isn't it a good thing that the Wu clan women can cook a delicious meal?」

「I know! That's not what I mean!」

Splash—— Ludo Wu slapped the water surface.

He really was like a child.

「Asuta.」

At this moment, Jiza Wu spoke for the first time.

「I was thinking about discussing something with you today.」

「Alright, what is it?」

「... You will be meeting that man from Rock City, Kamyua Yost right?」

Jiza Wu turned his burly body halfway, and looked at me with his eyes that was as narrow as a slit.

「Yes. If he comes to visit, I will meet with him.」

「I see... Forest's Edge didn't have restricted areas. We made an agreement with the lord of Genos to stop anyone from entering Forest's Edge willfully, but that is for the sake of keeping the people from the city safe. If that man visits again, we won't have any authority to stop him.」

「... Yes.」

「However, I won't permit anyone from the city to interfere with Forest's Edge. You should have realized after seeing the people from the Tsun clan right? The city's culture would only lead Forest's Edge down the path of depravement.」

「.....」

「Asuta, I could feel the aura of a city dweller from you. You should be living inside Rock City—— That's what I feel, am I wrong?」

Jiza Wu talked about the treatment I should receive.

Kaslan Lutim went against the custom of Forest's Edge, just what did Jiza Wu think of this matter? Was he against this even more than Donda Wu—— Such a thought arose in my mind.

「I don't know if you are right or not. But—— compared to the post station town, I prefer the Forest's Edge settlement.」

I could only give such an answer.

「I see.」

Jiza Wu stood up.

「To me, Kaslan Lutim is a very important kin. I wish more than anyone else for his wedding to proceed smoothly.」

After that, Jiza Wu used a cloth hanging on the door board to wipe his body, then left after putting on his clothes.

「...Asuta, you actually dare to talk to Jiza-nii in such a situation. I couldn't do that.」

Ludo Wu said in an exasperated tone.

「Well, I still don't know what's so terrifying about him. Aside from his outstanding aura, I don't know what I should be afraid of.」

「What do you mean? Compared to Dad, Jiza-nii is much more dangerous... Darum-nii, why do you detest Asuta? He cooks tasty food for us, and there are some things I don't really get about him, he is still a nice guy.」

Ludo Wu's words reached the depths of my heart. But seeing Ludo Wu interacting with Darum Wu fearlessly, I felt he was much stronger than me. They were brothers after all, so it was a given that they would get along.

As I expected, Darum Wu didn't answer. He didn't even look at me and left the water source just like Jiza Wu did.

「Hmm ~ Asuta, they really detest you.」

「Yes, I'm aware of that.」

「How should I put this... Asuta, Darum-nii seemed to be afraid of you.」

「What? Impossible! No matter how hard I try, I won't be able to beat him.」

「The men in Forest's Edge will never lose to you... unless it isn't a contest of strength.」

Ludo Wu sat crossed legged in the water, then turned to face me.

「How strange Asuta, you are so weak, but don't fear anyone. That night during the pre-wedding banquet, you looked even stronger than my Dad」

「Ahaha, I'm honored.」

「Hand.」

「Huh?」

「Let me see your hand.」

「Hand?」

I reached out my right palm.

Ludo Wu placed his palm on top of mine gently.

「Your hand is small, just like a woman.」

I felt my face showing astonishment just like Rimee Wu earlier.

Ludo Wu was shorter than me, but his fingers and palm was twice my size.

In a year or so, I might need to look up at Ludo Wu. Just the thought filled me with gloom.

But even so—— How blissful it would be if I was still in Forest's Edge one year later.

Part 3

After two peaceful hours, the food in the four pots were successfully cooked.

Half of the water had evaporated.

At this moment, I added in the tarapa sauce.

The content of the pot was slightly red because of the fruit wine, but it was completely crimson now.

Even though aria food was added for taste, the strong sourness and aroma of the tarapa still spread inside the stove room.

「Alright, I will be adding the poitan now. Don't mess up the numbers okay?」

Ten poitan had to be added to each pot. If we exceed that number, the texture would be powdery and terrible.

I slit the skin of the potato-like poitan, and toss them one after another into the pot.

Even with the small fire, the poitan break apart and dissolved immediately.

What an incredible ingredient.

It bore some resemblance to flour, but it was as close as kiba was to pork, onions to aria or tomatoes to tarapa.

Which means—— I wouldn't have tasted this food if I didn't arrive in this world.

As there wasn't any food that resembles it in my old world, I was troubled about how to cook it; and being so troubled made it hard for me to give it up.

As I was in deep thought, the ten poitan melted away without a trace.

The tomato red gradually turned into a color between pink and orange.

After carefully stirring it and adding rock salts and pico leaves to taste——

It was finally done.

After simmering it for two hours, even the inside of the chachi turned soft and tender.

Tino and aria were soft, and it melts in my mouth without even needed to chew it.

Next was the kiba meat.

The bite sized meat was really tender.

The shoulder meat slowly melts in the mouth, while the thigh meat retained its toughness.

The strong sourness of the tarapa complemented the taste of the ingredients on many layers—— which spreads an indescribable fresh taste in my mouth

As expected of a dish that took so much time and effort, of all the kiba dishes I had developed, this stew might be the best of them all.

However, this was a luxurious dish prepared for a banquet, not a family meal.

Such a lavish meal could only be ate during a banquet.

This dish would make the wedding even more joyous.

For the sake of enjoying high quality food, the people of Forest's Edge would perform their jobs as hunters even harder to earn copper plates—— That was the idea I had in mind.

I wish to convey this to Kaslan Lutim and his kin.

「Okay, put out the fire after a while more. Everyone, please stir it carefully so it won't get burned.」

Ai Fa, Leina Wu, Lala Wu and me stood in front of the four pots respectively.

The idling Rimee Wu was staring hard at me.

She didn't say a word, but her large eyes were sparkling.

「... You want to try——」 「I wanna!」

She cut off my words.

I used the spoon for taste testing to scoop up some stew. I looked down, and found the cute girl waiting for me with her mouth open.

Ara, this reminds me of that night when I met Rimee Wu for the first time—— I felt nostalgic as I send the spoon into her mouth.

「It... It's yummy...」

She was squinting from her smile.

She then stared at me again.

Now that I think of it, she also pestered me to feed her a second time when we met for the first time.

Rimee Wu wasn't greedy, so she wouldn't ask for a third time. As I was thinking that, I added some thigh meat and chachi pieces onto the spoon. When I was blowing to cool it, someone whacked the back of my head.

「Don't spoil that bratty Rimee! We won't have enough for the guests!」

「I'm not eating that much! Tomboy Lala...」 「Don't fight, don't fight.」 I said as I stuff the spoon into her wide open mouth.

Rimee Wu held the spoon in her mouth with an expression as if she was melting. Lala Wu raised her eyebrows and said:

「I can't even! How sly! I have been bearing with it and not steal a bite!」

「Huh? You are restraining yourself? You should at least try the taste, that's the privilege of a hearth tender.」

「Tell me that sooner! Bratty Rimee, hand over that spoon!」

「Ah~? Let me think about it.」

Even trivial arguments like this were cute. As I watched them happily, someone tugged at the corner of my t-shirt.

Leina Wu was looking carefully into the pot next to me just now, but she was looking at me bashfully.

「… Erm, I already said it is fine to try right? 」

Leina Wu's face lit up.

This atmosphere feels rather comfortable.

However, we could only take it easy now. In the afternoon, this place will turn into a warzone. I probably wouldn't suffer any retribution for spending some heartwarming moments with these three close sisters.

「… Is the morning's work done? 」

Ai Fa finally spoke.

「That's right. 」

When she heard my answer, she nodded and waved Rimee Wu to her.

「I will make a trip home then. Rimee Wu, can you take over for me? 」

「Okay! What are you going to do at your place? 」

「I have to turn over the meat in the food store. If left alone for the entire day, the pico leaves would get damaged. 」

I see, so there were chores to do at home too.

「Wait, I will finished soon. Let's go back together. 」

「But why? 」

Ai Fa tilted her head quizzedly.

「I'm just turning the meat, so I can do that alone. You can rest for now. 」

After saying that, Ai Fa left the stove room quickly.

「Hmm ~ … Does Ai Fa dislike us? 」

Lala Wu asked.

「No such thing. 」

I refuted her.

「She don't dislike you. Ai Fa is just slow to warm up to people.」

「But aside from Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba, I have never seen Ai Fa speak with anyone else. If she don't dislike us, then she is just uninterested in us.」

Lala Wu's showed a displeased face.

Was Lala Wu hoping to get closer to Ai Fa?

「Speaking of which... Lala Wu, you know about that marriage proposal two years ago? After that day, the relationship between Donda Wu turned awkward, that's why she got used to keeping her distance from the Wu clan.」

「But your attitude towards us is normal.」

「Because I'm retarded.」

「Yes, I know.」

So she already found out.

「But Papa Donda didn't mentioned that marriage thing again. Since she already got along well with Rimee and Grandma Jiba, so she has no reason to avoid us. Therefore, she must not be interested in us.」

「Not really, like I said—— she's slow to warm up to people.」

「Did you get along well after spending a lot of time...? Or rather, are you two close at all?」

「Hmm ~ What a troubling question!」

Leaving how close we were aside, I had never felt trouble about not getting along with Ai Fa. I even told her anything I want without hesitation, even though we didn't know each other for very long.

Even though we stayed under the same roof as if that was the most natural thing, when I first came to Forest's Edge, I only decided to stay in Ai Fa's house temporary to avoid getting into trouble which would make Ai Fa responsible.

That might be so, I had only known Ai Fa for a week, and I already said I wanted to surprise Donda Wu with my cooking. That must be a troubling action for Ai Fa—— But Ai Fa actual bore the same grudge, and was maybe even more agitated than I was. When she heard Donda Wu disparage my cooking, she was angry on my behalf.

Ai Fa always show a cold face, but her mood swings a lot, so I think this is only natural. But speaking of which, Ai Fa seldom showed her emotions to a group.

Ai Fa once told me—— 「I don't want you to suddenly disappear.」

Hmm~... This is bad.

I don't think I could explain the relationship between Ai Fa and myself clearly.

And discussing such things when Ai Fa wasn't around felt like I was betraying her.

I could only apologize to Lala Wu:

「Sorry, I don't know how to explain it.」

Lala Wu clicked her tongue, then turned her gaze to her sister tending to the pot diagonally away from her.

「Leina-nee, what do you think? We seldom talks to Ai Fa right?」

I thought Leina Wu would be troubled by this question, but her answer was faster than I imagined.

And her answer actually was: 「I still hope Ai Fa can marry into the Wu clan.」

「But why?」

When she heard Lala Wu's surprised question, Leina Wu smiled with her teeth visible, and glanced momentarily at me.

「Because Rimee and Grandma Jiba admires her, and I think she is an outstanding person... Furthermore, the Fa house will become a kin of the Wu clan」

Hmm ~ ... Doubts arose in my heart once again.

I was happy that Leina Wu opened her heart to me, but compared to Rimee Wu and Lala Wu who had a big age gap from me, I wasn't sure how to interact with Leina Wu who was my age.

I couldn't thank her sincerely after hearing what she said.

「Rimee thinks it's fine.」

Rimee tried her best to stir the pot Ai Fa entrusted her, and said cheerfully:

「Even if Ai Fa and Asuta aren't our family or kin, I still like them! It will be great if our houses are nearer!」

That was what I like about Rimee Wu.

I hope she could stay by Ai Fa's side forever and spread her cheerful smile.

「If you get along with the other party, you will naturally become friends.」

After giving this mediocre advice to Lala Wu, I ended this topic.

Part 4

After that, the war started.

Noon just passed.

「Well then, we will proceed as I explained yesterday, team Ditto Min Wu will cut the meat, team Leina Wu will dice the aria, team Mia Lei Wu will grilled the poitan.」

Eleven women gathered in the Wu main house.

Half of them were the women staying in the Wu clan village.

I splitted the eleven people into three groups to handle different task.

Grandma Ditto Min, Vena Wu and three others was responsible for cutting the steak and preparing the hamburg steak.

Leina Wu, Rimee Wu and two others will dice the aria to be used in the hamburg steak.

Mia Lei Wu and Lala Wu will use the stoves outside to grilled the poitan.

Sati Lei Wu will head to a house with young children, and they would take turns watching the children and grilling poitan.

There would be a hundred guests today after all.

And the men could eat almost twice the amount of a woman.

Just calculating it this way, I had to prepare enough meat and grilled poitan for 150 people.

I added a lot of ingredients in the vegetable stew, but I didn't know how the guests would allocate the meat in the stew. If I calculate the poitan in the stew, everyone would have less than half a poitan.

I heard that the custom in Forest's Edge was to provide more than sufficient food during big feasts, so I decided to omit the ingredients in the stew from my calculations.

The denizens of Forest's Edge usually live a plain and simple life, but it was different during a banquet.

In that case, I had to keep grilling the food.

And so, assuming there were one hundred and fifty guests——

Allocating 500g to one person, that would be 75kg.

One person would require two poitan, so that was three hundred.

So I decided to grill that many poitan.

On top of that, I asked next two biggest branch houses to cook the simple new dish 『fried vegetables』.

Since the ingredients in the stew was omitted, and everyone needs to eat three aria, we had to expend 450 of them.

After boiling it or frying it, the aria would shrink a lot. But just using one ingredient would not be appetizing for everyone.

And so, I chose a few vegetables that were suited for frying, being tino that resembles cabbage and pula that looks like green pepper to complement the aria. I fried a large amount of vegetables as a side dish for the steak and hamburger steak.

As everyone needed to consume three aria a day, the numbers still fell short even if I fry them. Having just one stew as a soup made me uneasy too. So I decided to add a soup with the three aforementioned vegetables and meat, so everyone could consume one entire aria from this soup.

And of course, kiba meat was also added to this soup. We used more than 120kg of meat in the soup, meat dishes and stew.

Going by rough estimates, there were 800g of meat for each woman, and 1.6kg for every man. I think—— this was a very sufficient amount.

The menu for today were as follows——

- Kiba steak (thigh, shoulder, ribs)
- Kiba hamburger steak
- Vegetable stew made from various vegetables, tarapa and kiba meat
- Grilled poitan with gigo mixed in
- Three types of fried vegetables

Soup with three vegetables and kiba meat

As the hearth care taker for this wedding banquet, this was my final conclusion.

Given how oily and simple the dishes were, I considered adding a cold dish of kiba meat. But I feel that it didn't seem to fit well with the banquet of a hunter tribe. After discussing with the Lutim house, they told me that 「compared to cold food, everyone prefers hot food more」, so I gave up on that idea.

By the way, when I asked them if we should removed the bones from the ribs, Dan Lutim said 「you absolutely can't!」, and completely rejected my proposal.

「Eating it with the bone is what makes it good!」

I was worried that someone would make a scene like Dan Lutim that night when they see the torso of a kiba. But Dan Lutim even said: 「If there are any leftovers, I will eat them all!」, seemed like I was worried over nothing.

In this five days, the concept that 「throwing the torso of the kiba away is a pity」 had gradually taken root in the Wu clan village. The women from the branch family here to learn and practice cooking took back the leftover meat happily, and cook it for their family, and succeeded in clearing the stubborn views of the men.

As the representative of the reformist Kaslan Lutim obviously wouldn't ditch the kiba's torso when they hunt kiba. And so, I didn't need to worry about the Lutim house.

When I discovered that Ai Fa didn't have the view that 「the torso of a kiba is monta feed」, I realized only the Wu clan and the equally powerful Lutim house harbors such views.

There would be guest from seven houses, with over a hundred people. Of these seven houses, only the Lei house could match the Wu clan and Lutim house in scale. The Min and Mamu house were significantly smaller, while the Lilim and Mufa house were even smaller. These houses probably wouldn't mind that.

「If the Lei house people don't eat, then I will!」

Dan Lutim roared loudly.

Simply put, if everyone could only get one ribs, the guests would probably feel dissatisfied.

In the end, we prepared 150 spare ribs as a service for the father of my client.

And so—— noon passed, and the Wu clan village turned into a war zone.

「Asuta! We finished cutting all the aria!」

「Wah, that's fast! Please mince the meat next!」

「Mince meat! Got it!」

Rimee Wu's knifework could rival her mother and sister, and she started mincing the meat.

I set the weight of each hamburg steak to be 200g.

If eaten together with the steaks, this portion would be plenty. But the men might hold reservation on this dish. So far, I had only tried making this dish in the Wu main house, and two of the four men there gave negative reviews. Hence, I was mentally prepared that half the men would not be able to accept this dish.

That being said, I still thought up a new way of eating it.

If they didn't like the soft hamburg steak, I would suggest they put the hamburg steak into the soup, and return it into minced meat.

That was the result of my research.

On the second day of my research, in order to fulfill my promise with Ai Fa, I decided to serve hamburg steak for dinner, but I didn't want to have different dishes for the men and the women.

Research aside, dinner was still dinner, and I think a family should eat the same meal.

And so, I developed hamburg steak soup.

Everyone was free to decide if they want to put the hamburg steak into the soup. If they do, they should stir the hamburg steak so it breaks apart before eating them.

They only like to eat tough meat when eating meat by itself. When they cook kiba pot, they would boil it with strong fire, and eat the meat that had turned mushy.

It was ruse I thought up, but the Wu clan men didn't express any dissatisfaction.

When I tried it, the meat soup would have the aroma of grilled hamburg steak, which increase the complexity of its taste.

And so, I decided to use this eating method in the banquet.

I also prepared fruit wine sauce, so those eating hamburg steak could add the gravy freely, and the same would apply for the banquet.

And so, as I cooked dinner for the Wu clan, I gradually completed the menu for the banquet.

Returning to the topic.

Back in the Fa house, I would mix in a lot of diced aria into the hamburg steak. But as the Wu clan village had many pots, I wouldn't be troubled over how the aria was used. And so, I would only use a quarter of an aria for every 200g of hamburg steak. This was the same ratio used when cooking hamburg steak in 《Tsurumi restaurant》.

Next, I prepared one hundred 200g hamburg steak. To preempt any that get burned during cooking, I prepared 20 more as spare, so that would require 30 diced aria.

「We will fry the aria. Ai Fa, please start the fire in a stove.」

Ai Fa nodded, then raise a fire in a stove nearby.

When so many women were gathered together, Ai Fa's presence became diminished, but she was actually supporting everyone. As the Wu clan's women were trained by me, Ai Fa couldn't use a

kitchen knife as nimbly as them. Her job was to start fire, carry the ingredients and other miscellaneous work.

She brought a large number of ingredients from the food store, then carried the prepped food back into the food store, shift the heavy pots and refill the water in the flasks ——Ai Fa took on all these unglamorous but tough work.

「Thanks, you are a big help.」

I said quietly into Ai Fa ears. She tilted her head, then mimicked me and whispered into mine:

「Since these are the dishes that will be served in the Lutim house's banquet, we should let their kin do the cooking right? That will be better for me.」

I tilted my head in doubt, then said quietly to her again:

「That might be so, but I'm not their kin either.」

Ai Fa tilted her head and moved her mouth even closer to me:

「You are working for them because you are paid to right? Don't lump our position together.」

While we repeatedly argued over this, Rimee Wu who was working hard on mincing meat suddenly interjected:

「What are you whispering about?」

「Nothing, it's a secret meeting.」

「Huh!? How sly! Rimee wants to have a meeting too!」

「Just kidding, we are just chatting idly. We are just lowering our voices so we won't disturb the others.」

I answered with a smile —— and locked eyes with Leina Wu who was staring at us.

Leina Wu was acting strange.

I was just whispering with Ai Fa, she didn't need to look at me with such sad eyes. I greased the heated pot with fats, put the diced aria into the pot, and felt a little gloomy.

Leina Wu was a capable girl. She was honest, innocent, kind, good at studying and has an outstanding appearance.

To be honest, if this charming and capable girl expressed a liking to me beyond friendship, it would make me feel more terrible than the allures from Vena Wu.

I didn't plan to find a partner in this world, and if I really settle on anyone here—— that person would definitely not be Leina Wu or Vena Wu.

「... Don't you need to add fruit wine? 」 , Ai Fa's voice pulled me back to reality.

「Uwah, I forgot! Ai Fa, can you——」

She waved a bottle of fruit wine before me.

「This is the first time I saw you make a mistake while cooking.」

When I hurriedly poured the fruit wine onto the aria that was turning caramel colored, Ai Fa's laughing voice echoed in my ears.

What kind of face was she making when she said that!? When I wanted to check, Lala Wu yelled:

「Ai Fa, please bring the additional poitan over! 」 , and she disappeared from my sight.

Damn it! I'm so uncool!

I used the spatula I made myself to scoop the fried aria onto a wooden plate.

After doing so, I raised my head and——

Leina Wu who was mincing the meat looked at me once again with a pitiful face.

Chapter 5 - The Lutim Banquet (Second Half)

Part 1

The sun slowly set into the west.

In less than two hours, darkness would engulf this world.

When the sun touched the western edge of the forest, the bride and groom would reach the Wu clan village, and the banquet would begin.

Right now, they were visiting every house of their relatives, and accepting their blessings.

After gifting their blessings to the newlyweds, the kins would also head to the Wu clan village.

Almost thirty of their relatives had already gathered in the plaza.

Children under the age of five didn't have the right to participate in the banquet, and these poor toddlers would be gathered inside a branch house, and the women would take turns to look after them.

Of the men gathered in the plaza, I could only see elderly men and youths younger than thirteen.

Even on a day like this, the hunters still needed to venture into the forest.

To avoid any misfortune, the hunters wouldn't push themselves, and return early. Aside from the Lutim house and Min house, the men from the other five houses were completing their obligations as hunters.

If they could present tusks and horns they hunted on that very day, it would be the greatest blessing.

That's how selfless, pure, and brave the denizens of Forest's Edge were.

「Alright—— we are all set.」

After completing about 70% of the preparation, I wiped away the sweat from my brow.

The poitan had been grilled.

The three vegetables had been fried.

The stew and meat soup were done.

The fruit wine sauce for the hamburg steak had been poured back into the empty fruit wine bottles.

Only the meat needed to be grilled.

Piles of the hamburg steak and a portion of the steak filled the stove room of the Wu main house.

There were six stoves in the Wu main house, and to differentiate between strong and weak fire, only three pairs could be used at the same time.

As the pots were big, five hamburg steaks could be grilled at the same time.

It was almost time.

「Well then, time to start grilling.」

On my word, everyone put the hamburg steak into the pot. The stove room was filled with the appetizing aroma of fats and meat being cooked.

Grilling the hamburg steak was the most difficult to master, so Leina Wu, Mia Lei Wu and I took on this task.

The women in the main house all headed to the branch houses to grill the steaks there.

The branch family women without any assigned tasks stayed in the Wu main house to carry the iron pots.

The mother and sister of the youth Shin Wu stood beside me with a Krilee stick in hand.

「Okay, please proceed.」

The two of them used the Krilee stick to shift the iron pot to the stove with the weak fire.

After the red juice ooze out from the surface of the meat, I had to flip it over and return the pot back to the stove with the strong fire. I will then pour in fruit wine and cover it with a lid.

The fragrance filled the entire stove room before I covered the lid.

Mia Lei Wu was using the stoves behind me, and Leina Wu was using the stoves outdoor, everything was proceeding smoothly.

「...Asuta, I'm honored to be of help.」

At this moment, someone said to me quietly.

It was Shin Wu's elder sister—— Shela Wu.

In Forest's Edge, this girl was really slender and had a frail air about her. She should be slightly older than me.

「After my father Ryada lost his ability to hunt, my younger brother who is just sixteen had to take on the mantle of house head, and our family felt gloomy about our future... But after tasting the dish you taught us, we were filled with happiness, and want to stay strong and live on. We're very grateful to you.」

「No, you are too kind. Your knifework is excellent, and is as good as Leina Wu.」

I opened the lid to check on the hamburg steak, and smiled at her:

「You have to keep making delicious meal and bring happiness to your family. That's something only you two can do... It's almost time to shift back to the weak fire stove.」

「Yes.」

The mother and daughter worked together again to move the iron pot.

After it was done, we finished the first batch.

「Asuta, you are an incredible person. My brother once said that you looked as ferocious as a hunter when you tend to the hearth.」

「That's flattering me too much, I'm not that great.」

「No, it's true. You can control the flame at will, and turn the tough and smelly kiba meat into a delicious meal... You are just like a magician from the eastern kingdom.」

「That's the job of a chef. There's no need to send out magicians, there are plenty of chefs better than me in the city... alright, it's done.」

Fake rubber tree leaves were placed on the working platform, and I placed the hamburg steak onto it.

After that, I used the wooden spatula to clear away the stains, and put the pot back onto the strong fire stove. After throwing down some fats, I put in five more meat patties. While I was doing that, Ai Fa placed another layer of fake rubber tree leaves on top of the hamburg steak, flat stones were placed on either side of the plank for support, and another board was placed on top.

We kept piling up the completed food this way.

「Ah, Ai Fa, what trees does these leaves come from? I use them often, but I don't know what the tree is actually called..」

「Fate rudder tree.」

「Huh?」

「These are leaves from the fate rudder tree.」

Ah, I see.

I will just call them fake rubber tree leaves then... I smiled wryly.

These leaves were bigger than two of my palms put together, didn't have any weird smell and had a smooth surface. Whenever there was a need to grill large amount of meat, this was an indispensable tool.

The guests would bring their own plates and skewers, so I used the thin planks as a tray, and the fake rubber tree leaves as plates. For the women, both making the thin planks and foraging hundreds of fake rubber tree leaves were a tedious workload.

But all of their expressions were cheerful.

How surprised and happy would their family and kins be when they saw all these dishes? Their faces were bright with anticipation, and even though the head chef was me, these were made together by everyone.

It would be great if this dish could deepen the bonds between the whole family.

I hope everyone could enjoy this happiness.

And I hope that Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min would have a great wedding.

「Asuta! We have finished grilling the hamburg steak here! I will start grilling the steaks now!」

「Okay, please go ahead!」

「I'm back!! Asuta, things are going smoothly in the other houses too!」

「Thank you, Rimee Wu. It's about time to heat up the vegetable stew, can you help me tell that to everyone?」

「Got it!」

The work was progressing smoothly.

After that, I heard there was an accident when shifting the pot, and five steaks were ruined. But the women from the branch family immediately came over to cut more meat, sprinkle salt and pico leaves on them, then left in a hurry.

「Oh no! This time, Vena-nee spilled the pot of aria soup!」

「What!? Is anyone hurt!?」

「No! But Vena-nee is about to cry! Or rather, she is already crying!」

「No need to cry! Everything except for the vegetable stew can be salvaged! This is a long banquet, tell her not to panic and take it slow, and make another pot in the usual way...! Ah, does anyone in that house know how to cook the soup?」

「I don't know! But if there isn't, Rimee can help!」

「Okay! I'm counting on you!」

I was already prepared for such sudden incidents.

While we were busy with various matters, the Wu main house grilled all the meat.

After that, we filled the pot with water, and piled as much food on top of the pot as possible. It didn't have much effect, but it could keep the food warm.

「Okay, things are fine here. I will check on all the other houses.」

「Got it. Well then, Leina Wu and the other girls can go change. We will keep watch over here.」

After Mama Mia Lei Wu said that, Leina Wu, Shela Wu and the other young girls answered:

「Yes.」 and left the stove room.

When this mother noticed my puzzled expression, she smiled gently:

「It's a banquet after all. For the unwed girls, this is a chance for them to stand out. Many people got engaged during such an event.」

「I see... So that's how it is.」

In that case, I better not go near Vena Wu or Leina Wu unless it was work related.

Only one unwed woman remained in the stove room. When I looked at Ai Fa, she stood majestically with a scary expression, then glared at me and said: 「I'm from the Fa house.」

I didn't really get it, but Ai Fa didn't seem to need to dress up.

I felt relieved and a bit of pity at the same time, a complicated feeling.

「Well then, let's go. If there are any problems, we will come back here immediately.」

Ai Fa and I walked out of the stove room together.

The sun was going to touch the western forest soon, so time was short.

「Alright then, the job is now half done.」

I glanced at the plaza where more people had gathered, then walked to the branch houses to the side.

「Half? Isn't most of the food done?」

「After finishing cooking, we still need to serve the food to the customers. Our job is only done when the bride taste the last steak and hamburg steak.」

The situation in the branch houses was fine.

Some houses were filled with fried vegetables, others had piles of grilled poitan, while another had tons of steak. Some of these houses were heating up the vegetable stew that was moved over there.

When we reached the last house, we saw Rimee Wu working hard to scoop up the foam in the soup by herself.

「Rimee Wu, thank you for your hard work. I see, this is the culprit that made Vena-nee cry.」

The stove beside Rimee Wu was wet, with aria and pieces of meat scattered all over.

「Where did everyone go?」

「They all went to change, all of them haven't married yet.」

「Then, what about you? Don't you need to change?」

「Yes, I will change after this soup is done.」

I see. I definitely have to see Rimee Wu all dressed up.

「I will switch with you. The bride's group should be reaching the Wu village soon, so you should hurry up and change. Ah, can you go help Mama Mia Lei after you have changed?」

「Got it! Thank you...! Hmm, Ai Fa, don't you need to change?」

「I'm from the Fa house. I'm not a kin of the Lutim house that is hosting this wedding, I shouldn't dress for the occasion.」

「I see... I wanted to see you in banquet attire though. See you later then!」

Rimee Wu charged out of the stove room in a flash.

The moment she stepped out, Shin Wu stepped in. That's right, this was Shin Wu's home.

「Yo, you are back, Shin Wu. Good to see that you have returned safely.」

「Yes... How are things on your side?」

「No problem, your mother and sister are working hard.」

I wasn't paying lip service.

The two of them were very dependable, which was why I asked them to help make hamburg steak in the main house instead of staying home. Not just carrying the pots, they were also a great help in making mincemeat and meat patties.

Also—— I really like this quiet, cold and clumsy youth. Whenever he bickered with Ludo Wu who was his complete opposite in personality, my soul felt at ease.

Shin Wu stared at his Ai Fa with his eyes that were a bit narrow.

「... So you are Ai Fa from the Fa house.」

Speaking of which, this was the first time the two of them met.

「I'm the head of this house, Shin Wu. Sorry for being so sudden, but there is something I would like to ask you.」

Huh? I alternated my gaze between the two of them.

They were both expressionless, and I couldn't garner any intel with my naked eye.

However, just seeing the two of them standing still quietly filled me with unease.

「Ai Fa, you——」, when Shin Wu was about to continue speaking——

「Shin, you are back?」

Shela Wu's voice could be heard.

「Ara...」

She stopped when she stepped into the stove room

「So you are here too. Ai Fa and Asuta, welcome to my humble abode.」

We didn't separate with Shela Wu for long, and she had already changed into the so-called banquet attire.

Uwah... I was a little surprised.

Shela Wu looked frail, and her appearance wouldn't leave a strong impression. But she looked really graceful and delicate, completely different from her usual self.

Her hair was dark brown like her brother. She didn't tie it up, and let it flow gently onto her back.

She wore a few flowers and berries on her hair, and had a translucent veil on.

The orange sunlight shone onto the veil, and it glittered like gems. So such a fabric existed in this world too! I was dumbstruck.

She probably changed the pieces of cloth covering her breasts and waist too, I didn't remember too clearly. The swirly patterns of them seemed more intrinsic, and the colors more vibrant.

A purple translucent cloth was also tied around her waist, which draped to her ankle. Aside from the krilee fruit to repel bugs, she also wore accessories made from a colorful assortment of wood and metal on her neck, wrists and ankles ——Shela Wu had become mesmerizing.

「Ah, is this the new pot of soup? If it is fine with you, please let me take over the stove.」

「Is that fine? I will leave it to you then... Be careful not to burn your clothes.」

「Yes, I understand.」

Her smiling face looked so gentle and charming.

When I turned towards Shin Wu, that youth shook his head calmly and said:

「My apologies, you are in the middle of work right? I will find you again after your work is done.」

「I see, then I will make a move first.」

Ai Fa left the stove room unhesitantly. I had no choice but to nod at the other two and follow her.

「Hey, do you know why Shin Wu want to ask you?」

「I don't know.」

Ai Fa answered icily.

「He's a man from the Wu branch house right? I don't know what he wants to talk to me about.」

「That's true.」

Never mind, Shin Wu wasn't a bad guy, he wouldn't plan anything nefarious. Even though there was doubts in my mind, I still needed to do my job.

When we walked into the plaza——

Cheers erupted the very next moment.

The bride and groom were here.

A group of thirty slowly moved towards the plaza. They were the families of the Lutim and Min house.

An elderly man stood at the very front.

He was probably the elder of the Lutim house. His was bald, and a long white beard flowed down his chest. I guess he must be very old, but his back was straight, strides were steady and he was wearing the clothes of a hunter.

Two children stood on either side of him.

One boy and one girl, both of them were younger than Rimee Wu.

They might be young, but the boy was already in hunter's attire, puffing out his chest and lifting his head up proudly.

The girl was dressed like Shela Wu, a translucent veil covered her head, and a brilliant smile on her face.

Their small hands carried a basket decorated with flowers and berries, a large number of white kiba tusks and horns were piled on it. These were probably the blessings for the newlyweds gifted by their kins. The men who had yet to offer their blessings walked to them quietly. After greeting the elder leading the group, they placed their tusks and horns into the basket.

Surrounded by an entourage of men in hunters wear and women covered in sheer fabric—— the stars of today entered the plaza.

Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min.

Naturally, Kaslan Lutim wore a hunter's attire.

The only difference was the kiba fur cape that was wrapped around his muscular body.

That was definitely a kiba fur cape—— Because the kiba head was still attached to the cape.

The kiba head was placed on Kaslan Lutim's broad right shoulder, as if it was biting him. The tusks and horns on the head protrude out prominently, giving the impression of it being alive.

The cape covered the right side of his body. As the left side of his body was bare, his large and small blades hung openly on his waist.

They were probably custom made for a wedding. Sheaths of the blades were covered in leather, marked with a brand and decorated with brightly colored stones.

He wore a simple grass crown on his head of brown hair, but that was enough to make the heir to the Lutim house look braver and stronger than usual.

The bride walked quietly beside him, her head covered by a veil that glittered like gems.

However, the bride's veil was different from Shela Wu and the other women. It had two or three layers and a crown was placed on it. Like in case of the groom, the crown was woven from grass.

The veil covered her face, even though the glitter obscured her expression, it was still clear that the bride was smiling blissfully.

The translucent fabric draped down from her shoulders and waist, covering her brown skin in a gentle layer of light.

The clothing around her chest and waist had a colorful swirling pattern, and the accessories on her neck and limbs were bright and eye-catching—— The glow of the stones on her body was more special and beautiful than anyone else.

The cheers blessing the couple kept going on, shaking the very air in the plaza. After that, a laugh that covered all the cheers.

It was the father of the groom, Dan Lutim.

The burly bald man led a posse of men and was laughing for unknown reasons.

I didn't know why he was laughing—— but he must be feeling really glad.

He must be filled with happiness and glee.

His son had grown to be an outstanding man, and married such a beautiful wife. That must make him extremely happy.

His beer belly wobbled, and the fats on his face also shook.

The children who saw that burst out laughing.

When Dan Lutim saw those children, he laughed out loud again.

It was some distance away so I couldn't see clearly, but there seemed to be tears in his big round eyes.

「Asuta.」 Someone tugged my arm gently after calling me.

I turned my head and found Ai Fa staring at me quietly.

I nodded and clenched my fist.

「It's finally time for the second half.」

The banquet —— was about to begin

Part 2

「Please bring the vegetable stew to the plaza! It's hot, so take it slow, no need to rush!」

What awaited me was chaos.

The Wu clan erected a stage in front of their main house, and after the bride and groom were ushered up, Dan Lutim gave an opening speech. But we didn't have time to listen to him. The moment the speech ends, we had to start serving out the dishes, so the guests could start dining.

The first thing on the menu was vegetable stew.

Ten makeshift stoves were erected around the plaza in a circular shape. We shifted the four pots as far apart as possible and started a weak fire.

After that, we brought over six pots filled with water and set them on the remaining stoves. These were used to keep the food warm. We started a medium fire in the stove, placed the board that

acted as a table on top of it, and then put the steaks and fried vegetables there. For the steaks, I chose to serve the thigh meat and Chuck flap that wouldn't start any controversy.

The women from the Wu clan stood guard beside every stove, and I asked them to distribute the food. I felt sorry about it, but they had to take turns to eat their dinner. From what I could observe, none of the women showed any unhappiness about this.

The women in charge of the steaks had piles of poitan in their hands. Whenever someone came over to take the meat, they would give them a poitan and tell them: 「This is poitan.」

The ladies handling the vegetable stew would pour the soup for the guests, and tell them: 「There's only one bowl for each person.」

People would grill and cook large amount of food in the usual banquets, and everyone was free to take as much as they like. Was my way of doing things too stingy?

However, I didn't think that just grilling and cooking meat without stench was enough. I hope to bring even greater joy to everyone, that the delicious food could make them forget their troubles for the moment.

My job was to move between the houses and relay instructions. Towards the end, I lost track of where each of the women was. Even Ai Fa who was by my side was gone after Grandma Ditto Min called for her.

「Well then, the banquet will now officially begin——!」

Dan Lutim's deafening voice came from the stage.

「Offering our blessings to Kaslan Lutim from the Lutim house, and Ema Min from the Min house!」

「Offering them our blessings!」

After the hundred odd kin said these words at the same time, the ceremonial fire was started in the wood piled in the center of the plaza.

Torches were also placed on the stands erected around the stage, which drove away the darkness.

Illuminated by the bright orange light, the people picked up their cutlery and skewers.

「Drink wine and feast on the meat! The women from the Wu clan worked very hard to prepare for this day, let us offer them our blessings!」

As Dan Lutim had been shouting all this time, his voice had turned hoarse.

Spurred by his shouts, the people grabbed fruit wine bottles—— and picked up meat on the fake rubber tree leaves.



Their strong white teeth tore the meat apart.

They drank the vegetable soup in their plates.

And hesitantly put the grilled poitan into their mouth.

I had no way to check what kind of faces the guests were making—— I could only rush around between each of the houses.

「Next will be the spare ribs in this house! Are you ready?」

「No problem. The meat we served in the beginning got gobbled in no time.」

The mother in this branch house said with a laugh, but I still couldn't remember her name.

「We should set off now. The girls taking the first shift want to taste the vegetable stew too, and are getting impatient.」

This mother's arms were bigger than mine. Each plank had seven plates worth of spare ribs, and she could carry three planks at one go.

「I'm going to relief their shift—— Hey, this vegetable stew is amazing.」

「Oh, you already tried it?」

「It would be a tragedy if I didn't. I rushed back here after finishing the stew. The other girls will be back soon, so you should eat something too alright?」

「It's fine, I will eat them. I will be counting on you then.」

「Alright.」

The mother went off.

After that, a roar came from outside:

「It's here, this is the spare ribs of the kiba! Those who are brave enough, come take a bite!」

It was the right decision for me to work behind the scene for the entire banquet. Even if an outsider like me appeared before everyone, it wouldn't make the food taste any better.

「Sorry for being late! We will bring out the rest!」

Several unfamiliar girls in beautiful attire rushed into the stove room.

「All the steak that was served in the beginning got gobbled up, there is just a little bit of vegetable stew left!」

「Alright, the soup will be next. Thank you everyone.」

Shin Wu house and their neighbour was responsible for the soup.

After rushing into Shin Wu's house, I found Shela Wu tending to the hearth alone.

「Hmm? You're alone? Your mother should be here too right?」

「She went to try out the vegetable stew, I already tried it earlier.」

Shela Wu had a frail smile on her face.

「This vegetable stew tastes really good... I'm about to cry from happiness.」

「I see. Please let me cook this for you when you hold your wedding.」

When she heard that, Shela Wu's face was covered in sorrow, and she shook her head.

「I'm born with a weak body, although I'm of marriageable age, I still didn't marry. A woman who can't even carry a water flask by herself will just be a problem in the house.」

「That's not true! Even if you can't move a water flask, you can still carry an iron pot. You can tend to the hearth if you possess that much arm strength.」

I was a little flustered at the moment and even winked at Shela Wu.

「On top of that, your culinary skill is outstanding, you will definitely be a bride that excels in cooking. When the men will understand the merit of delicious food, they won't be able to stop laying their eyes on you.」

「Not at all...」

Shela Wu was blushing.

At this moment, her mother came back.

「The vegetable stew is almost gone. Shela, it's time for us to go.」

「Yes.」

The steady mother and frail daughter carried the iron pot together with a Krilee stick.

After they left, I walked to the house next door.

The rest of the soup should be placed there.

After entering the stove room, I realized someone had already moved the three pots of soup. The stove was put out and there was only an iron pot with stew stains placed on it. And—— a girl was standing alone in the vast stove room.

It was Vena Wu.

「Asuta...」

She widened her sexy eyes that were drooping a little.

Vena Wu was in banquet attire too.

She wore a translucent veil, and her waist was covered with the same sheer fabric—— Even in usual times, her hair and limbs were decorated more extravagantly than other women, and there were even more accessories now.

Her chestnut colored hair she would tie around her right shoulder was let down, making her even sexier.

However, I couldn't fall for her beauty trap today.

「So the soup here had been moved to the plaza. Alright then, I need to attend to other work.」

I turned to leave.

「Wait!」

Vena Wu's yell echoed behind me.

This was the first time I heard her yelling so loudly. In the face of such an abnormal situation, I couldn't help stopping and turning to look at her.

Vena Wu slouched her shoulders like a child, then said with her head low:

「Asuta... Are you angry...?」

「Hmm? Why should I be angry?」

「I... spilled the aria soup...」

「Ah, it's about that. It's fine, the new pot of soup was done in time. It's just a small matter, I'm glad you aren't hurt.」

「... You aren't angry...」

She looked up at me in the eyes.

As I couldn't tell when she was playing around or being serious, I really didn't know how to get along with her.

「I'm not angry... Instead of such trivial matters, you should enjoy this banquet. You are in charge of distributing the vegetable stew, right? In that case, you don't have any other work for the time being?」

「I hate banquets... A lot of men will propose to me...」

You could accept one!

I wanted to say that, but I felt that it would make things more complicated, so I held my peace.

「Alright then, I'm going now.」

「Wait!」

She raised her voice again.

Vena Wu hugged herself with her arms and squirmed her body.

「Erm... I want to leave this house... But I don't hate my family...」

「What?」

What was she saying?

It was almost time for me to go to the next place.

「I actually love my family more than anyone else... I love everyone in my family... And I hope they can be happy...」

「What are you talking about?」

「I don't want to hate my family...」

What Vena Wu did next surprised me again.

She knelt down while hugging herself, then looked up at me as if she was pleading:

「It's fine if it is Ai Fa... I can hate Ai Fa... But if you get together with Ai Fa I will try to seduce you and destroy everything...」

「What the hell are you talking about!」

「I don't want to hate Leina.」

Vena Wu said to me clearly for the first time.

「Please don't get together with Leina... I don't want to hate my family...」

I was completely confused.

I could tell from Leina Wu's attitude that she has feelings for me. But even if we moved to the stage of marriage, the other Wu clan members wouldn't permit it.

Vena Wu looked sullen, utterly different from her usual self.

After troubling over it for a moment, I ran to Vena Wu and placed my hands on her soft shoulders.

「It's fine. I don't know what you are worried about, but you won't ever face such a crazy future.」

Luckily, I could say this sincerity without hiding how I felt.

Vena Wu looked up at me with teary eyes.

「I won't marry Leina Wu. So you don't need to hate her —— I can promise you that.」

I held Vena Wu's shoulders firmly and nodded forcefully. I already did my best to console her.

「... Sorry for interrupting your work...」

「Not at all, please proceed with the ending part as planned... I'm going off now.」

To escape from Vena Wu's gaze, I charged out of the stove room.

My heart was filled with guilt which made me flustered.

I didn't have time to console Vena Wu as I had to hurry to the next spot.

Was the guilt that I was feeling part of the job description?

In that case, I could only bear with it.

As I was thinking about that, I had already ran around the outside of the plaza.

The sun had already set without me realizing it, and the surroundings were illuminated only by the orange flames.

From some distance away, the people were just black shadows to me.

I couldn't see their expression at all.

However, they were emitting a large amount of heat.

The plaza was filled with the heat and life of the denizens of Forest's Edge —— it could even rival the raging ceremonial flame.

What a beautiful world.

A world full of life and energy.

I kept running, as if this amazing life force was pushing my back.

My next destination was the Wu main house that was far away.

The bride and groom sat quietly on the stage opposite the Wu clan main house. Dan Lutim stood beneath the stage with spare ribs in both hands, laughing out loudly.

Of all the dark figure in the dim lighting, he was the only person I wouldn't get wrong.

「You don't want to eat? If not, then I will eat it all!」

Please give everyone who wants spare ribs a chance to try them—— I prayed as I jogged to the stove room.

The next dish was finally hamburg steak.

「Ah, I finally see you, Asuta!」

There were about ten women in the stove room.

These were the rear guards who had already enjoyed the banquet, and would start working now.

Rimee Wu was one of them too. She stood at the entrance with ribs in both hands.

「Heehee, I'm mimicking Dan Lutim.」

「No no. Never mind that old man, if you also eat so much, there won't be enough for everyone. Actually, everyone is supposed to eat just one.」

「That's why I picked the smaller ones...! Is that no good too?」

Rimee Wu's dejected face was just like a puppy. I patted her head and said:

「You are really cute, so it's fine. Your clothes are nice too.」

「Really? I'm so happy!」

The little girls' banquet attire were just like the adults. Rimee Wu wore a glittering veil, and had all sorts of accessories and bangles on her. She was definitely the cutest one here. The large red flowers on both of her temples were exceptionally prominent. This accessory suited the red-headed Rimee Wu very well.

「Oh right, have you seen Ai Fa? I didn't see her around right after the banquet started.」

「Ai Fa? Grandma Ditto Min, you called for her right?」

「I only told her that the grand elder was looking for her. I didn't see her after that either.」

Grandma Ditto Min was also part of the hamburg steak team.

My lieutenant, and also the only other guerilla member, just where was Ai Fa hiding?

「Erm, If you are looking for the female hunter from the Fa house, I saw her carrying out the steaks just now.」

Donda Wu's second brother's daughter in law said.

「I see, thank you.」

It would be fine if she was acting on her own initiative without my instructions.

I also realized that running around by myself was the most efficient way.

「Looks like it is time for hamburg steak to go. That means everyone ate half of the dishes... Are things progressing too quickly?」

「Your dishes are delicious, so everyone finished it in no time.」

「Ara, I think most of it was eaten by the head of the Lutim house.」

The older ladies chatted cheerfully.

I wanted to laugh along with them, but unfortunately, I couldn't.

「After the hamburg steak goes out, everyone will just have one more steak each. Maybe we will need to cook more meat?」

「It's possible, it seems that this much food isn't enough. Both the men and the women are eating heartily and fighting over the meat.」

Was this the so called finding joy in work?

If there really wasn't enough food, we had already made preparation for additional grilled meat. But we didn't have more vegetables or poitan, and the most we could manage was more aria and tino.

「I understand. Please move the hamburg steak out, I will start cutting the meat. I will slice them thin so it could be grilled with just strong fire.」

「Alright, we are off then.」

Grandma Ditto Min gave the word quietly, and everyone carried out about 120 hamburg steak and many bottles filled with fruit wine sauces.

「Ah, Rimee Wu, when you are free, can you check on Vena Wu? She should be in the stove room of the house with three pots of soup.」

「Vena-nee...? Ah, Vena-nee always drinks by herself during banquets. Got it! Rimee Wu will help you bring out the hamburg steak first!」

「Thank you, I will be counting on you then.」

After the rear guard brought the hamburg steak out, the stove room immediately turned spacious.

Only the steak that will be served last was left behind.

In order to keep the steaks warm, I shifted them to the stove and closed the lid, then scooped up some water with the ladle to drink.

I felt exhausted.

And incredibly hyped.

I was a bit worried about Vena Wu, but other than that—— everything was proceeding smoothly.

I didn't know what kind of faces the guests would make when they dined, but I knew there was nothing to worry about just by looking at the women's faces.

There weren't any major accidents.

I just need to work hard for a bit more, and my job would be done.

I stretched my back, and walked to the food store to bring out the additional meat.

I wonder if Ludo Wu and Shin Wu enjoyed this banquet. I hope Ai Fa tried the vegetable stew.

I picked up the candle stand at the entrance, and entered the food store.

The meat storage should be further in.

We used the vegetable storage space to store the cooked food for the time being, and pushed all the shelves to the wall.

Almost all the vegetables were gone from the shelves.

Only the back up vegetables in case of any mishap during cooking was there, along with the ingredients not used in the dishes today.

I heard the Wu clan and Lutim house would split the cost.

Would this deepen the bonds between the two families? Or would it deepen any gulfs? I didn't understand the personality of Donda Wu and Jiza Wu too well yet, so I had no way of knowing.

However —— I just needed to finish my work.

I walked into the meat storage as I pondered.

The next instant——

The opened door was shut with a bang.

「Huh?」

I turned around, and a petite and soft thing pounced on my chest.

Despite being small and soft, it had plenty of strength.

I fell back onto the floor just like that.

The silver lining was that the candle stand didn't topple when I fell.

The light of the candle—— illuminated the complicated expression of Leina Wu.

Part 3

「L-Leina Wu? What happened?」

Leina Wu in banquet wear was on top of me.

She stuck close to my chest and looked at me with gloomy eyes.

「Asuta...」

Her petite and sexy lips squeezed out a raspy voice.

「Asuta, I have something to ask you...」

「M-Me?」

「Please become a Wu clan member.」

Her blue eyes that were right before me had a serious gleam as she stared at me.

「Please leave the Fa house and be a Wu clan member... Please become a part of our family.」

「W-Why are you saying this all of a sudden? There's no way Donda Wu and Jiza Wu will permit that.」

「I will convince father and Jiza-nii—— If I discuss this with them properly, they will understand.」

I didn't think so at all.

Or rather, I didn't want to do that.

「Why are you saying this so suddenly? Leina Wu, I don't understand what you are thinking at all.」

「I want to be with you! I want you to be our kin! When a house loses its strength, they will usually join another house. The denizens of Forest's Edge has always relied on each other to survive.」

Leina Wu grabbed the chest of my t-shirt tightly.

「Father has definitely acknowledged your strength. Once the clan head makes his decision Jiza-nii can't go against it. After that, I will spend my time to convince him!」

「That's impossible. I won't leave Ai Fa and become a Wu clan member... How can I do that?」

Just what kind of face was I showing now?

Leina Wu burrowed her brows painfully.

「I already told Ai Fa how I felt. It's fine even if it isn't Darum-nii, there are plenty of unwed men in the branch family. If she lay down her sword and resolve herself to marry... Ai Fa has a charming character, even Papa Donda wanted her to marry into the main house. Normally, no one would propose marriage to a house without kin like the Fa house...」

「But Ai Fa turned you down right?」

She actually said that to Ai Fa during the banquet.

As the door was closed, the noise from the banquet seemed so distant.

After that—— a sorrow-like emotion filled my chest.

「... Even so, I still want to be with you.」

Leina Wu buried her face in my chest.

「Ai Fa is strong, incredibly strong. She wouldn't waver on this. However... Ai Fa can live by herself, that's how strong she is.」

「You are right.」

Ai Fa had lived by herself for the past two years.

If she didn't meet me, she definitely would continue her life in solitude.

However——

We met.

「Ai Fa is a hunter. She chose to hunt kiba and wither away in the forest instead of nurturing the next generation, In that case—— there's no meaning for her to take in a man like you right? The Fa house's bloodline will end with Ai Fa, why don't you become a Wu clan member——」

「Leina Wu.」

I held her soft shoulders.

「Thank you for your kind thoughts. I'm grateful to you for worrying about my future... But I can't do it.」

Leina Wu raised her head in surprise.

I looked at the tears welling up in her blue eyes and continued:

「I have no intention of leaving the Fa house. Even if Ai Fa can live alone, I can't do without her—— I'm sorry.」

「...But why? Even the stubborn men from the branch family acknowledge your strength now. If I have time to convince Jiza-nii, the entire Wu clan will...」

「I also like everyone in the Wu clan. But I still want to be with Ai Fa.」

I pushed Leina Wu's body away as gently as I could, and propped myself up.

Leina Wu's body back away heavily onto my knees, her tears finally fell.

「I'm sorry... And thank you.」

Leina Wu stood up crying.

A strong gleam appeared in her teary eyes, and she looked straight at me.

「... I won't give up.」

She rushed out of the door after saying that.

The rowdy sound of the banquet crept in through the opened door once again.

I pushed my incredibly heavy body and stood up.

For Leina Wu, is this the right path to take?

She wanted to accept someone with dubious origins like me into her home, and to live together with her.

If the one who picked me up in the beginning was Leina Wu, instead of Ai Fa—— I would have been so blissed and happy. But the one I met first was Ai Fa.

I couldn't imagine living my life apart from Ai Fa.

I hit my temple hard a few times, then walked into the meat storage.

And then—— I stopped again.

A woman's scream came from the other side.

Was it Leina Wu?

No, several women were screaming at the same time.

Had there been an accident?

Could it be —— After serving the steaks and hamburg steak that looked alien to them, had the men finally lost their temper and started rampaging?

I didn't think about it any further and dashed out of the food store.

I passed the houses around the stage and ran into the plaza.

The plaza was in an uproar.

The joyous chatter earlier was like a dream—— negative emotions filled the tensed plaza.

Everyone was looking in the direction opposite the stage.

It was the entrance to the plaza.

Did the Lei house or some other big houses leave the plaza in a rage?

I avoided the crowd standing in the plaza as much as possible, and rushed to the side of the ceremonial fire in the center of the plaza.

The next moment—— an unbelievable sight appeared before my eyes.

W-What's going on here...?

My mind couldn't process what I was seeing.

Just what happened to cause such a mess? I couldn't imagine at all.

The stove nearest to the entrance had collapsed.

The hamburg steaks and fried vegetable on them was scattered all over the ground.

And then——

A dead kiba had crashed into the ruined stove.

It was a massive kiba and was around a hundred kilograms.

But it seemed to be rather old, its fur had lost its luster and one of its horns was broken.

Several wooden spears had pierced its massive body.

Huge amount of blood stained its dark brown hide, which gave off a terrible stench.

As the stove fire wasn't completely out yet, the fur on the kiba's head was scorched crisp black.

The feral kiba, blood and scorched fur—— the plaza was filled with these stench, as if someone had tarnished this night of blessings with malicious intentions.

Did the kiba crashed into the stove, and was hunted down by these men?

The kiba might have a ferocious nature, but they were timid, and would only attack if they encounter humans in close quarters. Normally, they would flee at the sight of a human.

It was unlikely for it to barge into a plaza with over a hundred people, and ram into a stove which had a fire burning prominently

I was confused, but I realized that my line of thought wasn't wrong.

Because there was a flat piece of board beneath the carcass of the kiba.

On the board was handles made from vines.

That was a towing board used to transport iron pots and water flasks.

The kiba didn't die here, someone carried the carcass here and hurled it at the stove.

Someone did so with malicious intent——

「What's the matter? This is a joyous occasion, so why is everyone so quiet?」

A nefarious voice of a man rang out.

This shrill noise was made by a young man.

It sounded familiar—— the deep tone and slurred voice.

I slowly lifted my vision.

On the other side of the dark fumes—— were three men.

One of them was a tall and burly young man.

He shaved his dark brown hair really short, and had blue eyes. Aside from being tall, he had no other prominent features.

There was another young man who was slightly shorter.

He might have a smaller stature, but his body was filled with muscles, had a bland face, and his expression was like a stone lion. He had messy hair, eyes that had the glint of a wild dog, and had dark brown hair like the other man.

As for the last person—— His body was as big as Donda Wu and Dan Lutim, and was like a meat balloon.

Given his height of almost two meters, just how heavy was he? I wouldn't be surprised if he weighs 200 kg. His face, arms, belly and legs were bloated. With how round his body was, he might be able to move quicker by rolling instead of walking.

His hairline had receded greatly, and he only had black curly hair beside his ears.

This made him looked old—— but his round face looked rather childish, so he seemed a little disgusting.

This was the first time I met this meaty balloon-like man, but I remember the other two man.

One of them was the heir to the Tsun clan I met one month earlier, Diga Tsun.

The other was the second son of the Tsun clan I had a run in with seven days ago, Doddo Tsun.

There's no mistake, there were from the Tsun clan that rules Forest's Edge.

「... Where's the house heads? Where are Dan of the Lutim house and Donda of the Wu clan hiding? The Tsun main house is here to offer our congratulations, and the house heads aren't even going to greet us? Huh?」

Diga Tsun shrill voice echoed in the plaza along with a stench.

These fellows—— was probably drunk and making trouble.

That eldest son and second son were both holding fruit wine bottles.

「Are you unhappy with the blessings we are offering? We brought such a huge kiba, this is an impeccable gift, right? It has three tusks and horns on it, eh? These are the blessings from the Tsun clan's main house eldest son Diga Tsun, second son Doddo Tsun and youngest son Mida Tsun for house Lutim, so accept it gratefully!」

Youngest son—— Did he just say youngest son?

Then that meat balloon was the youngest. Even the oldest Diga Tsun looked younger than twenty.

No—— That wasn't important.

I clenched my fist and observed the people around me.

The women were nervous.

The men—— were furious.

All the men showed their hunter's eyes, and took the stance of one. If anything happened, they would draw the sabres on their waists.

That was a natural reaction.

After all, the men from the Tsun clan were tarnishing their kin's banquet.

Even if these despicable people hailed from the chief clan, the proud hunters would not permit them to barge into the banquet in such a way.

But none of them moved.

The sound of the men gritted their teeth so hard that the very sound of that could be heard. They clenched their fist so hard that blood almost burst out as their fury rages quietly.

I heard that —— If someone went up against the chief Tsun clan openly, it would lead to a civil war that would tear Forest's Edge apart, and the denizens might lose their lives.

Was that why no one protested against this?

Were Donda Wu and Dan Lutim fuming in a corner of the plaza too?

But I couldn't stay silent.

Since I wasn't from the Wu clan or Lutim house, I felt I was qualified to engage them.

I went around the kiba's carcass, through the fumes and faced off against those men.

The next moment, fiery fires started to burn in the eyes in two of the three men.

But their eyes were still murky.

「What do you people want!?!」

I lashed out at them.

Their eyes turned more ferocious.

「I didn't hear that there will be any other guests! I'm only supposed to provide a meal for the Wu main house, and the hundred-odd kin of the Lutim house. I never heard about any last minute additions!」

「Outside... You foreigner leeching off the Fa house!」

Diga Tsun took a step forward.

He had a saber tied around his waist, but we were far enough away that he couldn't reach me even if he pounced my way—— or that was what I thought.

「Members of the Wu clan! Members of the Lutim house! What's going on here, you will host this outsider for your banquet, but not invite the Tsun clan!? Eighty years ago, the Min house was also a kin house of the Tsun clan—— If you invite outsiders, then the Tsun clan has the right to send their blessings too!」

「Please discuss this with the Wu clan and Lutim house heads! I'm tending to the hearth for this banquet in exchange for the payment made by the Lutim house! I won't allow anyone to disrupt my work!」

I tried to pass the initiative to Dan Lutim and the others.

Since these despicable people were at fault, I will rebuke them with proper logic, then the situation would be to our advantage. That was what I planned in my mind! But I couldn't help speaking my mind, turning the rage in my heart into words and forcing them out of my mouth.

I pointed at the pitiful carcass of the kiba.

「Clean up the carcass of the kiba right now! We will talk after you are done! Can you enjoy kiba meat while staring at the carcass of a kiba? Can you drink kiba soup heartily while smelling the stench of the kiba's blood? I won't accept this for a banquet I'm in charge of! Get that kiba out of here right now!」

「You brat——!」

「After that, if you receive permission from the head of the Lutim house, I will serve you food. However, I can't remake the food that you have ruined! If you disrupt my work any further, I will ask for remuneration from the Tsun clan!」

Diga Tsun's entire body shook.

Doddo Tsun who was standing beside him—— draw his blade.

The women scream rippled through the crowd.

「Retard! How can you draw your saber in a banquet!」

A steel and icy voice cut off the screams of the women.

The strength in this voice overwhelmed that of the retarded sons of the Tsun clan and me, filled with pride and rage——

Ai Fa's voice echoed through the entire plaza.

「My family member Asuta and I attended this banquet because of a trade we made with the eldest son of house Lutim, Kaslan Lutim! Outsiders don't have the rights to criticize this! I will let the head of the Lutim house deal with you—— but I won't permit you to draw your blade against a member of the Fa house!」

Ai Fa walked forth from a dark corner with strong strides.

She raised her head and puffed her chest with determination, and glared at the intruders with fiery eyes—— while dressed in elegant banquet attire.

Part 4

Ai Fa——

Her blonde locks fell slowly to her waist.

She wore a veil that shimmered like gems on her head, with flowers and berries adorned on her hair.

Accessories made from berries and metal were placed on her neck, arms and ankles, a thin piece of purple sheer fabric swayed on her hips.

She was in banquet attire like the other women.

Even though she was dressed just like them —— Ai Fa was more glamorous and beautiful than anyone else. At least that was how she appears in my eyes.

The only difference she had with the other women was the sheathed blade in her hands, and the stern expression of a brave hunter on her face.

「Ai Fa... I haven't seen you for a long time...?」

Diga Tsun held back his younger brother who had drawn his blade, then turned towards Ai Fa.

「What happened, you are dressed like a woman... You're finally considering marriage...?」

Diga Tsun's murky eyes had the gleam of unhappiness. A despicable smile appeared on his relaxed face.

When I saw his face that harbored ill intentions—— I almost lost my cool in rage and wanted to pounce on him.

Do not —— look at Ai Fa with those murky eyes!

Not only did this man insulted my work, he also plans to tarnish someone important to me?

Ai Fa was unusually calm in the face of these hateful gazes, completely unlike me.

「Hmmp. It would make the other attendees unpleasant if an unwed woman didn't put on banquet wear. After hearing this advice, I had to put on this veil. Eldest son of the Tsun clan, after I threw you into the icy river two years ago, you should know very well that I don't need a husband.」

「Why you...!」

「No need for talk, keep your blade! Barging into a banquet without any invitation, disrupting the peace and attempting to commit harm. Are these actions a member of the chief clan should be doing? Since you are from the chief clan, then you should act as a model for the denizens of Forest's Edge!」

Diga Tsun and Doddo Tsun glared at Ai Fa with agitated emotions.

The meaty balloon-like youngest brother was standing beside them, but his gaze lies elsewhere. He then said with his strange voice out of the blue:

「Hey, something smell nice... Mida is hungry...」

His voice was as high pitched as a toddler.

Normally, the larger a body was, the deeper the voice would be. But was he so fat that his voice box was being squeezed?

His existence seems to represent how far the Tsun clan had fallen.

「Shut up! You mentally challenged kid!」

The youngest brother turned silent unhappily after his brother yelled at him.

This might be a good chance, so I probed the three of them for a reaction:

「Since you insist that you are here to gift your blessings for this wedding, then sheath your blade and take care of this kiba. If you receive permission from the head of the Lutim house, I will prepare food for you ——」

「Who will allow that!?」 — the one who answered wasn't from the Tsun clan.

A man emitting killing intent approached from behind me.

I turned back, and behind me were—— Dan Lutim and Donda Wu.

Dan Lutim was still holding a large spare rib in his hand, and veins were bulging out from his bald head.

Donda Wu had a fruit wine bottle in hand, his feral face had a faint smile.

Both of their eyes were burning with fire.

The two heads let out more blood-thirst than anyone else present.

「You brats... you dare desecrate my son's wedding!？」

Never mind Donda Wu, this was the first time I have seen that uncle from house Lutim being so furious.

His round eyes were so wide that they were almost going to pop out, his thick brows were raised up high. His loose facial muscles were cramping, white teeth could be seen through his open mouth and the thick artery on his temple was throbbing.

Compared to now, his anger towards me in the past was akin to that directed to a puppy that pissed in the wrong place. Right now, he was truly like an Arabian demon god.

Could the Tsun clan people keep their cool after seeing the fury of the Lutim house head? When I turned my gaze back to the front——

Diga Tsun stood stiffly with a pale face.

Doddo Tsun tightened his grip on his blade with trembling hands.

And Mida Tsun—— He just stood there confused.

「Who wants to accept blessings from despicable people like you! Who the hell will treat you despicable lot to a delicious meal!」

As Dan Lutim roared, he bit the ribs in his hand, and threw the leftover bones onto the ground.

Donda Wu also took a large step forward.

「Brats of the Tsun clan... You think you squits can be our opponents? If you want to taunt the Wu clan and Lutim house, then bring your clan head and all the men with you!」

His roar was like a clap of thunder.

I heard a shrill scream from Diga Tsun faintly.

「Given how old this kiba is, is its meat even edible? Who wants blessings from brats like you!」

Dan Lutim strode forth, and grabbed the kiba in the stove by its fur.

The next second, something unbelievable happened——

Dan Lutim lifted the massive kiba that weigh almost a hundred kilograms over his head with his bare hands.

This kiba might be about Dan Lutim's weight, his brute force was incredible.

「Uwah, uwahh!!」

Diga Tsun kept backing away.

Doddo Tsun looked like he wanted to flee.

Even Mida Tsun screamed 「Wahh」.

「Get lost!」

Dan Lutim threw the entire kiba.

「Uwahh!」

Diga Tsun and company grabbed their heads and scampered away.

The kiba's body rolled pitifully on the ground. When the spears on its back snapped off, it had rolled to the entrance of the plaza.

Diga Tsun and his group had already disappeared into the night.

「A bunch of retards!」

Loud cheers drowned out Dan Lutim's roar.

The thunderous cheers—— proved how much they detested the Tsun clan, what they thought and how they usually suppress their agitated emotions.

「Dan Lutim—— sorry for being too rash.」

I took off the towel wrapped around my head and bowed to Dan Lutim.

His demon god-like face instantly turned into a gentle smile.

「Mr Asuta, what are you saying!? I merely couldn't move for a while because I was so mad that I couldn't breathe! You said what I was thinking at that moment, and that was what made me regain my senses!」

Did he just said—— Mr Asuta?

When I realized it, Ai Fa was standing beside me.

She was showing her usual cold face.

But her attire was completely different.

「Those brats only came here because the alcohol got into their heads. If their actions are sanctioned by the clan head, they would have brought the men from the branch family with them.」

Donda Wu's eyes still had remnants of rage, and he finished his bottle of fruit wine in one breath.

「Hey! Return that old kiba to the forest! The monta will wipe away the mistakes made by those brats.」

Several men nodded, and rushed to that pitiful kiba.

When he saw this scene, Dan Lutim's brows drooped in sorrow.

「Ara, I feel bad for that kiba. If you get reincarnated into a kiba again, I will properly eat you next time!」

I couldn't help but laugh. Dan Lutim turned to me and said:

「Mr Asuta! After venting my rage, I'm hungry now! Is the next dish ready yet?」

When his large hands were about to grab my shoulder I backed away quickly——

「Your hands! Please wash your hands! You grabbed the fur of the kiba just now! Don't grab the ribs by your hands to eat them!」

「The ribs are all gone. Mr Asuta, are there any ribs left?」

Dan Lutim pouted his thick lips.

His face was just like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

「If there are any left, I will grill them. So please wash your hands and wait—— Alright then, I still have work to do.」

「Okay! Thanks, Mr Asuta!」

I glanced at Ai Fa.

Ai Fa nodded, turned around and said:

「I will take care of the damaged stove.」

I looked at her long blonde hair and her beautiful figured wrapped in a translucent cloth. A short while later —— I ran to the stove room.

Time passed, and the banquet finally reached its climax.

The bride and groom sat on the stage and watched the banquet this entire time. And now, guided by the elders from the Lutim house and Min house, they walked down the stage.

The elders led the two to the stove erected opposite the stage.

Jiba Wu held Vena Wu's hand, and waited for them.

The couple knelt before Jiba Wu, the groom grabbed his right shoulder while the bride grabbed her left shoulder, and they both lowered their heads.

Herbs were burning in the stove. Jiba Wu removed the grass crown with trembling fingers from their heads, and heated them with the smoke coming out from the stove.

She then placed the groom's crown onto the bride, and the bride's crown onto the groom.

After the two got up slowly, Jiba Wu removed two tusks and horns from her necklace, and gifted one to each of them.

「I gift my blessings to you two... Tonight, Ema Min will become the wife of Kaslan Lutim of the Lutim house, and is bestowed with the name of Ema Min Lutim. This will deepen the bonds between the Min and Lutim House, and lead Forest's Edge to greater prosperity and strength....」

「The forest bestows Ema Min Lutim to Kaslan Lutim.」

「The forest bestows Kaslan Lutim to Ema Min Lutim.」

All their kins erupted in cheers once more.

The women from the Wu branch house carried an iron pot through the cheering crowd, and placed it on the stove that was burning the herbs.

In the pot was a hamburger steak that was not finished yet, a piece of steak left specially for the couple.

The women added firewood quickly and brought the stove to a raging flame. Even a 「strong fire」 wasn't enough to describe the heat right now.

After that, the women took Jiba Wu's hands and took a step back.

Vena Wu walked to the front this time.

According to the customs, the oldest unwed woman of all the kin house will offer this meat to the bride, which represents the first piece of meat the bride would accept after changing her family name.

Vena Wu stood in front of the stove, and grabbed the fruit wine hanging on her waist.

The bottle only contained the necessary amount.

Vena Wu poured the content into the pot nimbly.

The next instance, a bright red flame erupted, and then vanished without a trace.

Uwah... the kins all cheered.

Vena Wu took a step back and pointed to the pot gracefully.

The women shifted half of the firewood to adjust the fire.

The bride and groom walked to the stove, took the skewers from the women and pry open the hamburg steak.

As I watched the bride stuff the meat into her mouth, my work was officially done.



Chapter 6 - The End of the Banquet

「Here it comes, this is really the last meat!」

The additional grilled meat was sent to the plaza.

Just how much meat did everyone eat today? I already lost track, but the men and women all cheered and gathered.

I stood at the side of the Wu main house, watching over the scene as I said to the girl besides me:

「...Lala Wu, aren't you eating?」

「No, I'm already full. If I eat too much, I will get fat.」

I think she could fatten up a bit more. Compared to her two elder sisters, she was too slender.

Lala Wu was twelve, and from her body type, she would probably grow taller. A few years later, she would surely be a charming lady that rivals her sisters.

「Ah, the flame during the last part is impressive. What is that?」

「It's a strong liquor that will burn when lighted, not the usual fruit wine.」

And that of course, was the fruit wine Kamyua Yost gave to us as a present.

I couldn't think of any other way to use it, so I just used it to liven up the last part of the banquet.

「That's true.」

Lala Wu said disinterestedly, closed her eyes and said:

「Ema Min Lutim looks so stunning. She is a beauty, and the wedding dress made her even more glamorous.」

「That's right. I'm surprised too... But, Lala Wu, your dress is nice too.」

Lala Wu was also in banquet wear of course.

She might be young, but when she let her hair down, she looked very feminine.

I carefully avoided complimenting her looks and just her clothes, but she still punched my back hard.

The intense pain stung my exhausted body.

「That hurts... So, you are looking for me?」

「Hmm? It's nothing special... Have you seen Shin Wu?」

「Shin Wu? I don't know, he should be hanging out with Ludo Wu.」

「Ludo Wu is with my other brothers. Strange, I just saw him with Shela Wu.」

It couldn't be helped, this was a banquet with over a hundred people after all.

Even after my work was done, I still haven't met Ai Fa.

「Yo, Asuta, thanks for your hard work. Not only did you need to tend to the hearth, you also had to deal with the retards from the Tsun clan, it must be tiring right?」

Speak of the devil. Ludo Wu suddenly appeared before us.

「If Jiza-nii wasn't beside me, I would have beat them all up by myself. Well, forget it, it's a Lutim house banquet after all, we should show some respect for the father of the Lutim house.」

「Bratty Ludo, don't cause trouble. You better not get involved with the Tsun clan.」

「Shut up tomboy... And so? What are the two of you doing? Asuta you want to take this thing of ambiguous gender as your wife after all?」

When the enraged Lala Wu wanted to slap Ludo Wu, he dodged her nimbly.

「Don't fight, this is a wedding... Ludo Wu, do you know where Shin Wu is?」

「Shin Wu? Ah, he is in the empty house you are staying in right now.」

When he said that, Ludo Wu frowned a little unhappily and continued:

「Speaking of which, Ai Fa is with him too... Damn it, I hope Shin Wu won't say anything unnecessary.」

Unnecessary?

I found a missing piece of the puzzle in my tired mind.

「What do you mean? What did you instigate Shin Wu to do? By the way, why do Shin Wu want to speak with Ai Fa?」

「Shut up, it has nothing to do with you.」

Ludo Wu looked at me.

I nodded, and pulled back my shoulders that were leaning against the wall.

「Lala Wu, let's go take a look. I'm also looking for Ai Fa.」

「Hmm? Okay...」

Lala Wu showed a weak expression. I grabbed her arm and walked to the plaza.

「Hey, what happened? What's going on between Shin Wu and Ai Fa?」

「I don't know yet. I don't really know Shin Wu's temperament. Lala Wu, please help me talk to him.」

I went through the crowd with the puzzled Lala Wu, and headed to the empty house.

Everyone looked very pleased.

After the banquet ended, I could finally see everyone's faces.

The men who always wore serious expression was smiling red faced now.

Meat and wine, family and kin, the orange burning flames, the strong groom and beautiful bride —— There was plenty of things for them to be intoxicated by.

I was happy to have taken part in this banquet.

I was proud for finishing my job.

In this world, only Ai Fa could share this feeling with me.

「Ah...」

Lala Wu raised her voice.

The plaza was bright, but the empty house was very dim, with no one in sight. Ai Fa and Shin Wu's figure appeared behind the empty house.

Shin Wu's figure mixed into the crowd, and only Ai Fa was left behind.

「Shin! Shin Wu!」

Lala Wu shook off my hand and ran in the crowd.

And I naturally ran towards Ai Fa.

「Asuta...」

Ai Fa opened her eyes wide in surprise.

「What's the matter? Did something happened?」

「No, we are fine.」

I stopped in front of Ai Fa.

The next instant, my right knee buckled.

Before I fell, Ai Fa's strong arms supported me.

「What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?」

「No... I'm just too tired. In the end, I just grabbed some random things to eat.」

「Retard, you didn't eat properly even though you have to do so much work?」

Ai Fa said angrily, then guide my body to lean against the wall.

「Wait here, I will bring some meat.」

「No, it's fine. I can't eat yet.」

I grabbed Ai Fa's arm in a panic.

「The job is finally done, let me bask in the moment for a bit longer.」

After saying that, I slide down slowly and sat on the ground.

Ai Fa looked a little troubled, but she chose to sit besides me in the end.

But she didn't prop up one knee like she usually does, but sat cross legged.

「Ai Fa, since you already dressed up, it will be fine if you acted more femininely.」

「Even you are saying such weird things. I only put this on because Grandma Jiba was very adamant about this.」

Ai Fa flicked her veil with her slender finger.

「I might be a woman, but I'm still the head of the Fa house, and a hunter. Others will just think it is hilarious if I put this on.」

「That's not true. You might be the head of a house and a hunter, but you are also a woman.」

Seeing that Ai Fa looks unhappy, I smiled at her and said:

「This clothes really suits you. I'm not just paying lip service, you look really nice like this.」

Ai Fa's cheeks didn't blush. She looked as if she had choked on something, and looked very surprised.

Finally, she said:

「Don't say something so ridiculous.」

She looked towards the plaza which showed no signs of ending any time soon.

「... Your work is done.」

「Yes, it's over.」

「I don't know what the future might bring, but you completed your job.」

「Yes.」

「Asuta, that's your strength.」

Ai Fa had a thousand yard gaze.

How strange.

Up until just now, Ai Fa had been acting normally. But now, her existence felt very far away.

「Asuta.」

「Yes.」

「You should stay in the Lutim house.」

I stared at Ai Fa's side profile.

Ai Fa still wouldn't look my way.

「Kaslan Lutim acknowledged your strength. Even Dan Lutim did so. They might not let you marry into their main house, but just like how you are staying in my house, they will welcome you to be a part of the Lutim house even if you are not related to them by blood.」

「Hey.」

「When your bonds with them deepen, they might be willing to let you marry into the branch house. And then, you will have a place in Forest's Edge——」

「What are you talking about? Why are you saying this all of a sudden?」

I pressed her for answers.

Ai Fa still wouldn't look at me.

「... Let me ask you instead, why are you staying in the Fa house?」

「You are asking me now...?」

「The Fa house isn't as well off as the Wu house or Lutim house. I don't want to eat such lavish food either. You can only use aria, poitan, kiba and just a bit of vegetable as ingredients, and cook meals for two—— will that be enough to satisfy you?」

「I'm very satisfied. I'm not cooking for you as a head chef, but as a family and Fa house hearth tender. The job of a hearth caretaker is to serve up a meal within the limited budget.」

「And you are satisfied just with that?」

「Yes.」

I answered unhesitantly.

「Working as a chef makes me glad. I feel happy, elated and blissed. But I don't want to tend the hearth for the Wu clan or Lutim house, but the Fa house. You are the one who I want to taste my meat the most.」

「.....」

「There might be another madman who wants me to care take their hearth for one night. I will welcome such a job. I hope to keep that anticipation in mind and continue cooking for the Fa house.」

「But...」

Ai Fa looked somewhere else and muttered softly:

「I deepened the grudge with the Tsun clan again today.」

「Me too.」

「I'm strong enough to protect myself. But when I enter the forest, I won't be able to protect you who will be home alone.」

「In that case...」

「But the Lutim house and Wu clan can protect you. Even if they look for trouble like today, the Tsun clan won't have the guts to clash with the Wu clan and Lutim house.」

「.....」

「Asuta, it's too dangerous for you to stay in the Fa house.」

「... Is that what you think?」

I pressed Ai Fa again.

But she didn't waver.

「It's too late for that now right? We already ran into Doddo Tsun seven days ago. So why are you only saying this now?」

「... Since that day, you have been staying in the Wu village.」

「That's right. But you just told me this morning that 『we will go back to our usual lives tomorrow』, so why say all this now?」

「... We deepened our grudge with the Tsun clan again today. And you showed your capability to the Lutim house.」

「Is that all?」

「... Someone told me that you shouldn't stay in the Fa house.」

「Was it Leina Wu?」

「.....」

「That's what I thought. I should be grateful to her for being concerned about me, but...」

Leina Wu's sorrowful face flashed in my mind.

「That's how she feels, not me. I just want to act according to how you and I feel.」

「.....」

「I already made up my mind, I want to stay in the Fa house. Unless you feels frustrated by it and wants to chase me away, then I will leave.」

「... If I tell you to get lost, would you?」

I grabbed Ai Fa's shoulder that was further away from me angrily, and forced her to face me.

Ai Fa could have brushed away my arms, but she didn't resist.

Her blue eyes finally looked my way.

「I want to stay by your side. Until you grow tired of me, I don't want to leave. If you want to chase me away, you can try with all your might... Although your strength is greater than mine.」

「.....」

「You said you didn't want me to disappear, was that a lie?」

A fire burned in Ai Fa's eyes.

「I don't want you to disappear, or for you to be in danger. That is why I am asking you to become a member of the Lutim house.」

「Is that so? Even if that is what you think, I still want to stay by your side. If—— the Tsun clan becomes a real danger, we will think of something. In the worst case, we can ask Kamyua Yost for help.」

「... That man is a citizen of Rock City.」

「If you are not willing to, I will give up on that thought. If not, I will prostrate to the Wu clan and Lutim house, and beg them to protect me who isn't their kin—— I'm willing to go that far in order to not leave you.」

The fire in Ai Fa's eyes started wavering.

Was she angry? Or did some other emotions she herself didn't understand had sprout forth?

Even though she was a woman, Ai Fa had the air of a hunter about her.

The female hunter Ai Fa was a unique existence in Forest's Edge.

And I ——

「... Why was Shin Wu looking for you?」

「What?」

「You spoke with him just now right? Did he asked you about 『sacrificial hunting style』? In order to feed his five family members, he wanted to use the 『sacrificial hunting style』 too—— Did he find you in order to discuss this?」

「.....」

「Ai Fa, how did you answer him?」

「... I told him that 『sacrificial hunting style』 was too dangerous. If he succumbs to the forest, then who will protect his five family members?」

「I see. But you have me as your family too, but you are still using the 『sacrificial hunting style』 right? Is the sweet scent on you from the fruit that attracts kiba?」

Ai Fa's face turned a little pale.

Despite her agitated emotions, she still felt embarrassed when I mentioned her scent.

I like the scent on her——

The sweet smell of the fruit that attracts kiba.

The refreshing aroma of herbs.

The stinging scent of the pico leaves.

The gentle fragrance of the Krilee fruit.

The delectable smell of meat and fats.

All these smell combined into the Ai Fa's scent—— and I like this scent.

It was a scent unique to Ai Fa.

The unique scent of Ai Fa who took on the jobs of both the men and women by herself.

Only Ai Fa would have this smell that merges both the forest and a home.

「Don't do something so dangerous for the sake of hunting—— Ai Fa, you won't want anyone to tell you that.」

「.....」

「It's the same for me. I don't want anyone to tell me that caretaking the hearth in the Fa house is a dangerous job.」

Ludo Wu's words echoed in my mind.

—— Don't worry about her, respect her instead.

Ai Fa craved hunting kiba so much that she resorts to such a dangerous method.

In order to live as a denizen of Forest's Edge—— to live as a hunter.

If she stop using the 『sacrificial hunting style』, she would need to give up on her identity as a hunter. And marry into some other houses as a woman.

If Ai Fa wants to reject this fate and live on as a hunter——

If Ai Fa could only become a strong, noble and elegant existence by doing so——

Then I wouldn't refute Ai Fa's choice.

I was attracted to her because Ai Fa was such a person.

Ai Fa had both the scent of a forest and a home, possessing the tenacity of a hunter and the gentleness of a girl. I want to stay by her side because that was the kind of person she was.

「I will think about how to deal with the Tsun clan. Ai Fa, let me stay by your side. I want to be with you.」

Ai Fa turned quiet for a moment.

She looked at me with the intense light in her eyes, as if she was probing my intent.

After who knows how long——

Ai Fa averted her face and muttered 「do whatever you want.」

She pouted her lips a little.

Her cheeks were still slightly blushed.

She was finally back to her usual self.

At this moment, a large figure walked towards us with a crisp sound of metal ringing out.

「Sorry for disturbing at such a busy time. Asuta and Ai Fa, can I have a bit of your time?」

The man before us was actually Kaslan Lutim.

This brave hunter wearing a cape that had the head of a kiba attached looked down at us silently.

「Ah, hello, we aren't busy.」

When I answered, I realized I was still grabbing Ai Fa's shoulders, and unhand her in a hurry.

Ai Fa had turned her face away with her cheeks beet red and lips pouting. No matter how you looked at it, we were in the middle of something.

And this guy could actually talk to us at such a moment, he was really brave.

「My apologies. It's hard for me to leave the main event, so I still came to greet you despite it being rude.」

「Ah, it's fine.」

I stood up.

Ai Fa also stood up, and elbowed my sides really hard.

「I don't know if I can see you two tomorrow, so I want to bring you your payment tonight.」

He took out the outstanding payment—— the tusks and horns of ten kiba.

It must be a part of the blessings he received for the wedding. He strung them up carefully with a rope.

「Thank you for your delicious cooking. I believe I made the right decision after seeing how blissed my kin looked.」

「I want to thank you for believing in me... And congratulations on your wedding.」

「Thank you.」

The groom showed a bashful smile.

「Regarding the matter with the Tsun clan—— I'm sorry that you have become the subject of their scorn. Father Dan and Donda Wu both drew their blades in rage, and the men around them had to suppress them in the meantime.」

「No, we made a stand of our own conviction, I'm just afraid that this will bring trouble to the Lutim house.」

「No matter how much we worry, trouble will still find us at any moment. I realized this tonight.」

Kaslan Lutim's honest eyes showed a strong gleam.

「However, the Tsun probably couldn't do as they please. Even if they think we are an eyesore, there wouldn't be anyone hunting the kiba without us. To protect their peaceful life, they won't clash with the Wu clan or Lutim house.」

「I see, are you referring to the prize money given to them by the city...? I can't believe those people are actually from Forest's Edge.」

「You're right—— But you are different. The Fa house only have two members, so the Tsun clan won't hesitate in exterminating you.」

Kaslan Lutim said in a heavier tone:

「However, if the Wu clan and Lutim house are close to the two of you, they wouldn't dare to go too far... That being said, they still did something so outrageous tonight. Ai Fa, Asuta, please take care of yourself.」

「Alright, we will keep that in mind.」

Kaslan Lutim nodded, and then looked at the necklace I received from him.

「By the way, is twenty kiba really enough? I wouldn't mind giving you all the blessings I received tonight.」

「It's more than enough. I'm very happy! I will spend it unhesitatingly in the next few days.」

After saying that, I turned to Ai Fa whose cheeks were still a little blushed:

「We can buy a new pot now! The Fa house can have soup and grilled dish at the same time. House head, all that hard work is worth it right?」

Ai Fa continued to pout and kicked me lightly.

Mid Meal Snack: The Young Sage

This youth has a strange air about him ——Kaslan Lutim harbored such a forthright thought in the beginning. This was the first impression Kaslan Lutim had of Asuta. During the pre-wedding party, Asuta of the Fa house tended to the Wu clan's hearth.

The youth had dark hair, black eyes and ivory skin. His appearance was obviously that of a foreigner. Compared to the hunters of Forest's Edge, he was skinny and had a face as gentle as a woman. He probably couldn't hunt kiba. From his frail appearance, Kaslan Lutim think he must hail from Rock City.

However, his eyes was different from the citizens of Rock City Kaslan Lutim saw in the past. He had a bright and shiny gleam in his eyes.

He wasn't afraid of the denizens of Forest's Edge.

That was why he had such an unfathomable air about him.

This man from the city was staying in the Forest's Edge settlement, and was cool and composed despite being surrounded by the denizens of Forest's Edge. And he wore the attire of Forest's Edge, and claim to be a member of a house of Forest's Edge. With how the denizens of Forest's Edge were alienated in Genos, this was unbelievable.

But since this youth appeared before me, that means it actually happened.

Why did Donda Wu let someone like this tend his hearth? Kaslan Lutim couldn't understand.

Since just now, his father Dan Lutim was enraged, and Ema Min lowered her gaze troublingly.

If this continued, the relationship between his father and Donda Wu might fracture.

That worried Kaslan Lutim the most.

In order to stand up against the nefarious Tsun clan, they needed to muster more strength. Hunt more kiba, bear more children and get more kins. They need to defeat the Tsun clan one day, If the elder Wu clan sour their relationship with their most powerful kin house the Lutims, the future of Forest's Edge would be shrouded in darkness.

However... Donda Wu looked just as mad as father Dan.

The young man named Asuta just had to serve the torso of a kiba as a dish for the pre-wedding.

There was nothing wrong with eating the kiba's torso. Like what the head of the Fa house said —— the opinion of the rumored female hunter Ai Fa.

Calling this body part as monta feed was an insult to the powerless houses. Even though 「weakness is a sin」 was the unwritten rule in Forest's Edge, disparaging the weak was no different from what the Tsun clan was doing. The weak should serve as a lesson that compels one to obtain greater strength. There wasn't any meaning in insulting others repeatedly.

That might be so, he still couldn't understand why they insist on him eating the kiba torso meat too.

「This meat is delicious.」

Even though the head of the Fa house said that, he still couldn't understand what that means.

When he took a bite of the kiba spare ribs in this heavy atmosphere, he realized what she actually meant.

Kaslan Lutim put the meat in his mouth without much thought as he was concerned about his father and Donda Wu's reaction, and felt an incredible impact——

This is...

It tasted different.

There wasn't any stench.

What was this red and sticky liquid? It had the sweetness of fruit wine, and the fragrance of rock salt and pico leaves changed the taste of the kiba dramatically.

So this is... delicious meat?

The foreign taste spread in his mouth.

This was—— joy.

This was happiness.

The happiness of living.

Kaslan Lutim wasn't exaggerating, this thought actually emerged in his mind.

When he see the happy faces of his family, when he hunt a huge kiba, when he lay his exhausted body in bed—— and when he hold his lovers in his arms, a feeling of joy would flow through his body. And now, a similar feeling of bliss had exploded in his mouth.

Before his brain could even understand it, his body and soul could already feel the bliss. It was an incredible sensation.

When he was thirsty, water and fruit wine would taste really good.

When hungry, meat and vegetables would be exceptionally delicious.

But what Kaslan Lutim was feeling wasn't such routine emotions, but something deeper—— a bliss and happiness that shook his very soul.

He felt a gaze, and found Ema Min smiling at him when he turned his head.

She must be thinking the same thing.

Kaslan Lutim couldn't digest the shock and impact to his heart, and when he realized it, he was smiling in return too.

He still couldn't grasp what was happening at that moment.

But the premonition that a grand revolution was about to begin took hold of Kaslan Lutim's soul.

The next day, Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min visited the Fa house together.

They were here to ask Asuta to be the hearth caretaker for their wedding.

When he heard his father Dan Lutim proposed that, Kaslan Lutim thought in surprised that his father had another outrageous idea. But strangely, when his father was turned down by Asuta, it sent a strange tremor through his emotions.

Asking someone not related by blood to tend to the hearth for your wedding was against the customs of Forest's Edge.

Even though it goes against the customs, there might be greater significance to found—— this thought made Kaslan Lutim feel uneasy.

When he shared how he felt with Ema Min, she answered: 「I feel the same way too.」

And so, the two of them visited the Fa house.

They never thought that Asuta would reject them so adamantly.

「... I'm sorry, but can we give you an answer tomorrow?」

When they heard the head of the Fa house said that, Kaslan Lutim returned to the Lutim village with Ema Min.

「Don't worry, we definitely conveyed our feelings to Asuta.」

Ema Min said on the way home.

「Asuta might be from another country, but I could feel a soul befitting a denizen of Forest's Edge within him. That's why it definitely won't be a problem.」

「Yes... He really is an amazing person.」

「Is that so?」

Ema Min answered:

「I can easily imagine Asuta being a fellow denizen. It will be more natural if Ai Fa is a man and Asuta is a woman.」

「That's right. A woman who is a hunter and house head, and a man that tends to the hearth... Life is strange.」

「But they look very happy. In that case, maybe that is the way things should be.」

Ema Min laughed out softly like a child, contrary to her usual self.

「Do you remember how they looked when they just reached home? Ai Fa's expression was unexpectedly gently, just like a normal girl. She will only show that face to her family member Asuta.」

「Hmm? I didn't realize at all.」

「I see. I thought Ai Fa is a strong hunter who is stubborn and unapproachable. If a family like that is with her, she should be able to live a peaceful and stable life.」

Ema Min said. She had a smile on her face as she looked up at Kaslan Lutim.

「If I never met you, I might envy them a lot.」

「I see.」

Kaslan Lutim gave a short answer.

As Ema Min strode forth, she quietly embraced Kaslan Lutim's arm.

「If Asuta takes on this job, how blissful our wedding day would be. If they still reject us tomorrow, I will keep visiting the Fa house until he agrees.」

Luckily, Asuta agreed to take on the job of hearth caretaker.

Kaslan Lutim relayed his terms to Donda Wu, who accepted readily.

「Kaslan Lutim, I have heard! You asked Asuta to be the hearth caretaker for your wedding right? It must be tough to make that resolve!」

Inside the Wu village, Ludo Wu came to chat with Kaslan Lutim.

He had always been a cheerful youth, and now, a big bright smile could be seen on his face.

「And Asuta will be tending the Wu clan's hearth everyday before the wedding right? I'm super happy!」

「I see. I asked Donda Wu to accept such a forceful request, so I feel more at ease after hearing you say that.」

「The way you speak is still so deadpan...! But you are going to gift twenty kiba worth of tusks and horns to Asuta right? He will gladly accept this job even if you didn't do that.」

「But in that case, it wouldn't sit right with our rules. I asked a non blood kin to tend to the hearth for my wedding, so i have to make the payment.」

「Is that so? We didn't pay him anything though? We only gave him a tusk or a horn each as a blessing.」

「... Speaking of which, why did the Wu clan ask Asuta to tend to your hearth in the first place?」

And so, Kaslan Lutim learned for the first time what transpired between the Fa house and Wu clan.

Including how Ai Fa was good friends with Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu, how the Wu clan proposed to Ai Fa after she lost her father—— he learned all this for the first time.

「So Asuta's cooking saved Jiba Wu...」

「That's right. But even so, Jiza-nii and Darum-nii still wouldn't accept Asuta. But that night's dinner seemed to have changed my dad's mind.」

Kaslan Lutim groaned for a while, then decided to talk to Jiza Wu and Darum Wu.

The sun was about to rise to the top of the sky soon, and Asuta will be reaching the Wu village at that time. He had to complete this task before that.

「Jiza Wu, Darum Wu, can you bother you for a moment?」

The two of them happened to be in a corner of the plaza.

To prepare for their hunter's work for the day, they were resting under the windy shade of a tree, and were chatting.

「It's you, Kaslan Lutim. I wanted to speak with you too.」

Jiza Wu stared at him with his slit like eyes.

「Our clan head Donda just told me about the arrangement for the wedding... Why are you entrusting something so important to Asuta of house Fa?」

「I think doing this will bring strength to our blood kin.」

Jiza Wu's face was gentle as always.

But Kaslan Lutim knew very clearly that there was cruelty and passion in his heart, and such a character befits the heir of the Wu clan very well.

「If it could deepen the joy of living, it will strengthen our will to survive. I don't think that is wrong—— but Asuta of house Fa is a foreigner.」

「Yes. But isn't he a member of the Fa house now?」

「If the house head agrees, anyone can become a family member. However, in the eighty years since we moved to the edge of Morga's forest, no foreigner had ever been taken in as family before.」

「That's right, Asuta just happen to be the first foreigner to do so. Since there are no rules against this, there shouldn't be any problems right?」

「... .. Asuta learned his skills from outside Forest's Edge. Can you be sure that it will bring positive change to Forest's Edge?」

「I can't tell if this change is in the right direction, but that doesn't mean it is wrong. Hence, I will choose to believe it its right.」

Jiza Wu crossed his arms without any change in his expression.

Darum Wu stared at Kaslan Lutim without any hint of hostility, and remained silent.

「Jiza Wu, I understand your concerns, I'm also worried about this too. However, continuing to reject strength from the outside world might not be the right move either. The world outside Forest's Edge is boundless, we can't dismiss everything out there to be wrong.」

「All our brethrens will only spend their live in Forest's Edge. The outside world has nothing to do with us.」

「Is that so? Jiza Wu, we are born in Forest's Edge and bred in Forest's Edge, but we didn't spring out from the trees.」

He knew that even if he said that, the other party wouldn't agree with him, but he couldn't help voicing it out anyway.

To Kaslan Lutim, Jiza Wu was an important kin, and the heir to his elder clan. Even if he acknowledge the other party's views and feelings, he couldn't hide what he thought and reach a compromise with him.

「Eighty years ago, when our ancestors still lives in the forest of Jaguar, they have never gotten involved with the people in the city before, and lived by ourselves in the forest. After moving into

the Morga forest, they started selling kiba tusks and horns to the Post Station Town, and lived by the laws of Genos. Even so, we still stubbornly refused to mingle with the people in the city—— is this really the right path?」

「Your judgement is sound. However, hasn't the Tsun clan that is closely related to Genos fallen into depravity?」

「That's exactly why we have to interact with the city. We can't harvest the grace of the forest, so we have to erect a bridge to the outside world in order to survive. In that case, we have to build our relationship with the outside world in a more correct manner.」

「Is that the reason—— why you accepted Asuta?」

「I didn't thought that far. I just think it isn't right to reject Asuta because he hails from a foreign land.」

Jiza Wu sighed softly, then shook his head that was supported by his powerful neck.

「No matter what, the clan head Donda has already acceded to your request, and we will follow the clan head's orders. I can only pray that you are right, and that Asuta wouldn't bring us disaster.」

「If anything untoward happens, I'm willing to pay with my live.」

And finally, Kaslan Lutim tried talking to the quiet Darum Wu:

「Darum Wu, do you harbour the same doubts as Jiza Wu?」

「I—— don't understand such difficult things.」

Darum Wu answered unhappily.

「I just can't stand the sight of that pale skinned guy.」

This seemed to be a simple problem.

Darum Wu was just being difficult like a child.

... Speaking of which, Donda Wu wanted Ai Fa to marry Darum Wu back then.

He probably still bear a grudge about that.

Kaslan Lutim would be marrying in a few days, but he still don't understand boy girl relationship very well.

No matter what, I have already chosen this path.

He could only believe in himself and strive on.

Kaslan Lutim bid farewell to the two of them, and waited for the visit of his fellow denizen from another nation.

The busy day went by in a flash, Kaslan Lutim could finally stand before Asuta with a heart of bliss and satisfaction. The wedding has concluded successfully.

「I'm relieved that it ended peacefully.」

Asuta said after taking the necklace that served as payment.

He seemed completely exhausted, his eyes half shut with his back against the wall, as if he would fall at any moment.

But a satisfaction that was on par with Kaslan Lutim could be seen in his eyes.

Ai Fa's face was red for some reason and her face turned away. But the same emotions filled her eyes too.

... When she's dressed like this, she don't look like a female hunter at all.

Ai Fa was in banquet wear, and more glamorous than before. And she seemed to have opened her heart to Asuta.

The female hunter Ai Fa and the hearth caretaker Asuta. In Forest's Edge, they were the most unique couple. But Kaslan Lutim also realized that they were family with their soul closely connected.

「Asuta, you are amazing.」

Kaslan Lutim felt the incredibly rowdy banquet behind him, then said:

「You are a foreigner, but I think of you as a fellow denizen of Forest's Edge. Even though your strength, character and appearance are all different from someone in Forest's Edge—— that is the most incredibly point for me.」

「I see. I'm amazed that everyone can accept someone like me too.」

Asuta said in a sleepy voice.

「It's all thanks to Ai Fa. She took me in, and that threaded my bonds in Forest's Edge.」

「Shut up.」

Ai Fa said with a sneer.

Her soft cheeks were still dyed red.

I see... If Ai Fa didn't met Asuta, he wouldn't be here today.

If anyone else discovered a foreigner in Forest's Edge, it was unlikely for them to take him home. Normally, they would just leave him where he was, or at the most, send him to the Post Station Town. Any outsiders who encounter ill tempered hunters would face even worse fate.

After Ai Fa took him in, he got to know the Wu clan and Lutim house because of the bonds between Ai Fa and Grandma Jiba—— and so, I get to meet him.

How would this encounter influence Forest's Edge in the future?

Kaslan Lutim wasn't a prophet, and he had no idea what the future might bring. Even so, he had a premonition.

Asuta and I chose the same path.

Kaslan Lutim could feel this very clearly during the banquet.

Asuta brought him great joy and happiness, and had become an irreplaceable existence in his heart.

This had nothing to do with blood relations. Asuta of the Fa house might not be his kin, but he was a fellow denizen of Forest's Edge.

I will stand shoulder to shoulder with Asuta and head into the future.

He didn't know what awaited for him ahead.

And instead of a premonition, this feeling was closer to being a deep belief.

If anyone attempts to harm Asuta, I will be his shield. If they reject him, I will speak up in his stead. After all, Asuta brought me such a great harvest today.

Tonight, Kaslan Lutim got a beautiful wife and an important friend, there wasn't anyone more happy than him. He chewed on this thought quietly in his mind.

「Asuta, you——」

「Sorry, he's asleep.」

Ai Fa cut off his words.

On closer look, Asuta had collapsed on the ground before he knew it, and fallen into deep slumber as he leaned on the wall.

His face was as innocent as a child, and filled with satisfaction.

「In the end, he slept without a word. He's still half baked in this sense.」

Ai Fa said slowly.

But her eyes were filled with love.

「Sorry for disturbing you when you are so tired, please have a good rest.」

「Yes... Is the banquet still going on?」

「Yes. No one will sleep until the last drop of fruit wine is finished.」

「I can't stay up that long. I will make a move first then.」

Ai Fa put her head under Asuta's arm, then heaved him up.

Asuta was still sound asleep, and breathing steadily.

「Ai Fa, I want to thank you.」

「Hmm? We received proper payment for this job, you don't need to thank us over and over again.」

「No, not for tonight. I want to thank you for bringing Asuta to Forest's Edge.」

「About that... You don't need to thank me either.」

Ai Fa pouted and averted her face.

If Asuta wasn't here, she wouldn't be showing such a face to Kaslan Lutim either.

「Alright then, I'm going now.」

Their relationship with the Tsun clan had grown more adverse, and there was also that mysterious man from the city——Kamyua Yost... There will be more troubles waiting for them tomorrow.

Kaslan Lutim will not hold back and help them whenever he could.

Today, he just hope they could rest safely in the Wu village, and prepare to face what tomorrow might bring.

Kaslan Lutim thought as he burned the figure of his friends into his eyes, then turned and return to his lovely wife.

The ceremonial continued spewing out crimson flames, as if it was going to engulf the very night sky.